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# **THE SECOND BEAST**

**JULIA SMUTS LOUW**

## ABSTRACT

This novel is about guilt, blame, truth, reconciliation, jazz, and goats.

When we first meet them, the two main characters, Mia and Cassie, are grieving the loss of another character, Sam, to an act of random violence. Each bears some measure of indirect guilt in relation to Sam's death, and each finds ways to avoid confronting it. Herein lies the seed of the book's main theme: frustrated catharsis.

Cassie's worldview is fundamentally logical, and Mia's fundamentally magical, although part of what the book sets out to show is that any human mind contains both mindsets; coexisting and sometimes conflicting. One way in which the magical or mythic mindset asserts itself in both characters is through the "will-to-ritual": a persistent urge to engage in symbolic, ritualistic practices in order to effect catharsis.

The conceptual framework for this book is informed by two separate studies of the phenomenon of catharsis in culture, as treated by two authors: James G. Frazer and René Girard.

Frazer's anthropological study of world mythology, *The Golden Bough*, explores how common elements in myths across the world can be shown to provide the basis for all religion.

In his extensive exploration of the nature of magical beliefs, Frazer describes various magical rituals that allow for the transferral of the sins or ills of one person into a vessel (object, animal, or person), from many people into one vessel, or from one person into many vessels.

As Frazer shows, central to the religious practices of most cultures is an annual ritual, attached to the cycle of the seasons, fertility, and the harvest, in which a sacrificial victim is designated as a vessel to rid the community of its collective ills. In the fullest extrapolation of the model, the ritual culminates in the symbolic slaying of a sacred king.

Girard, approaching the subject from a sociological angle, begins with the observation that all desire is "mimetic" or imitative. In summary: a subject's desire for an object is always provoked by another subject's desire for the same object. The first subject identifies a second subject – the mediator – as the possessor of status to which he or she aspires, and indirectly desires the object desired by the mediator. Subject, object, and mediator thus exist in a "triangular" relationship.

This latter model is expressed in the conflict between the main characters, between other characters, and between the main characters and other characters.

Girard explains that the process of mimetic desire has a knock-on effect, such that many subjects come to desire the same object. Inevitably, the conflict turns to violence, and, the desire having been imitative to begin with, the original object of desire is forgotten. There follows a "sacrificial crisis". The generalised antagonism can only be resolved by focusing the violence onto an arbitrarily chosen victim. This principle of social psychology, according to Girard, is the origin of all ritual sacrifice practices in human culture.

One such practice, used as an illustrative example by both Girard and Frazer, is the ancient Hebraic ritual enacted on the Day of Atonement, in which one goat is sacrificed within a city's walls, and a second – the *Azazel*, or scapegoat - driven out into the wilderness, thus purging the community of its sins.

This specific ritual is used as an analogy for the course of action followed by the two main characters. On another level, it serves as the springboard for an exploration of the crisis of violent crime in South Africa.

Following inverse character arcs, the two main characters each, at separate points in the action, symbolically take on the role of the 'first goat', and attempt to sacrifice themselves, in both cases due to subconscious guilt.



Each character is also given an opportunity to escape this fate, making them the “second goat” – the “one that gets away”. When the characters re-encounter one another in a second city, the locus of the catharsis ritual is shifted; the formula is played out anew, and their positions are reversed.

Only when they come to accept their individual guilt, consciously and rationally, can the recourse to magical ritual and purely symbolic attempts at catharsis cease. By the time Cassie and Mia reunite in a third city, each has come to realise that their greatest guilt is not towards Sam, but towards each other. Although this results in renewed blame, the vicious cycle of self-deception and self-sabotage has been broken, and the potential for true catharsis is restored.

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## Allusions with page references

- 9 The phrase 'First-born unicorn' is taken from the Red Hot Chili Peppers' song *Californication*
- 11 The quote at the top of the page is taken from *René Girard and Myth* by Richard Golson
- 45 'Quills upon the fretful porpentine' is from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*
- 173 The lyrics on this page are taken from Leonard Cohen's song *Marianne*
- 180 'Twenty years of blissful ignorance vexed to nightmare by a rock band' is a play on a line from WB Yeats' *The Second Coming*
- 261 'Needs more cow-bell' is a line from a *Saturday Night Live* skit featuring Christopher Walken.
- 292 The lines *And Chuck said god is an Indian giver, I don't trust nothin' but the Mississippi River* are from *Downstream* by The Rainmakers
- 293 "Shout about its ears and palms beneath its feet" is paraphrased from *The Donkey* by GK Chesterton
- 309 'Late is the hour in which this conjurer chooses to appear' is from J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*
- 341 'Screw your courage to the sticking place' is from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*
- 352 'If it bleeds, you can kill it' is taken from the movie *Predator*
- 415 'Whiplash girlchild in the dark' is a line from Lou Reed's song *Venus in Furs*
- 415 'Bridesmaid stripped bare by her bachelor' is a play on Marcel Duchamp's artwork *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelor, Even*
- 430 'Nature, red in tooth and claw' is from Alfred Lord Tennyson's cantos *In Memoriam A.H.H.*
- 437 'Bullet Tooth Tony' is a character from Guy Ritchie's movie *Snatch*
- 490 The 'Special Fred' song is by comedian Stephen Lynch
- 507 'Make the sign of the teaspoon' is a paraphrased line from Paul Simon's song, *Diamonds on the Soles of her Shoes*
- 528 "Things fair and fell sat upon her brow, young was she and yet not so, and thought and knowledge were in her glance, as of one who has known many things that the years bring. Young was she and yet not so, things fair and fell were set upon her brow" is from J.R.R Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*
- 561 'The Labyrinth of mirrors' is a concept introduced by Richard Kearney in his book, *The Wake of the Imagination*
- 577: The line *Benjamin you nasty youth, your crime has shocked me to the core* is from Tim Rice's libretto for Andrew Lloyd Weber's *Joseph and his Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat*
- 'Footnotes to Plato' refers to a quote from Alfred North Whitehead: 'all philosophy is a series of footnotes to Plato.'

Everything else is my fault, although I must note that the phrase "Climb the ladder before you knock it down" is borrowed from a philosophy lecture. I do not know who originated it.

# **THE SECOND BEAST**

**JULIA SMUTS LOUW**

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I wish I could play like Art Tatum's right hand

- Charlie Parker

She awakens in the small hours on the twentieth of November to a choir of sparrows and a sense of luminous clarity, the events of the past night ebbing for a time to an inconsequential murmur, like faraway traffic. The police had finally returned her to her home at about midnight. Wide-eyed, her tongue clenched against her palate, she had trembled her way through two cups of sweet, weak tea and the first cigarette she had ever smoked in her family's presence, answering the questions a second time. She fell asleep at last in her mother's bed.

Beyond the sliding door the deck gleams in the predawn light, the boards rough from too many summers without a new coat of varnish. He is leaning up against the railing, framed between the two cascading bougainvilleas that her mother can never bring herself to prune, looking out towards the dawn with his head to one side, as if listening.

In two hours she will rise, she will undress to take a second bath – the cold will not leave her for another day and night – she will turn naked to the full length mirror and gasp to see the bruises. On her neck: a noose of them, like a torque of truth, and on each side of it the marks of his thumbs and fingers. On her flank: a great tender shadow the colour of aged steak, darker on the ribs. She will stand entranced at this new self, this shape of things revealed, as if she has suddenly been afforded an aerial view of the terrain she must navigate. *So this is what the world is like.* She will consider photographing herself in this state; her eyebrows in the mirror will jerk, intrigued, at the thought, before she turns to retch emptily into the basin. She will find that the wound in her scalp has opened again and she will need to wash new blood and old blood out of her hair.

For now the pain is distant and not unpleasant; nothing worse than the afterache of any day's exertion on the mountain, any mountain. She moves her head to a cool patch on the pillow, wonders how anyone can stand so very still, and why she had never asked him to pose.

He is still wearing nothing but board-shorts and it occurs to her that he must be cold.

She sits up. Sam, she says, do you want a blanket, Sam, and although he could not have heard her through the glass he turns his head to look at her. At last he looks at her and he smiles. Then he leaves.

Mia?

Inneke de Villiers shifts in the bed beside her, her voice syrupy with sleep.

*Ma, Hy's veilig.*

*Natuurlik is hy, my kind.*

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Out of the twenty-three albums that were released by Art Tatum between the years 1941 and 1957, and which comprise the fruits of his magnificent (some might say, incomparable) career as a jazz pianist and composer, there were only two of which Sam Loudon had not succeeded in securing a vinyl copy by the age of twenty-two.

The first, chronologically in order of studio release, was 1949's *Art Tatum at Shrine Auditorium*, and this one he had on CD. The second was 1956's *Art Tatum with the Buddy Franco Quartet*, and to her immense satisfaction, this one Cassie had found, on vinyl, "as new", with original sleeve art, two months earlier on Amazon.

The holder, unfortunately, did not ship outside the United States. This was a minor setback. Cassie arranged for the album to be delivered to the home of the Loudons in Pleasant Hill, California, and she arranged for the Loudons to ship it to Stellenbosch. She offered to reimburse them for the shipping fee. They told her not to be silly.

There was, she had thought, about a fifty percent chance that it would arrive in time for his birthday. If it didn't, it wasn't a disaster; she would just give it to him late. But it would be nice if it did. She wanted to be able to put it on the turntable while he was in the bath that morning, possibly causing him to leap out, sloshing, when he recognised the music filtering in from the living-room. Cassie hoped he wouldn't decide to take a shower that morning.

*Art Tatum with the Buddy Franco Quartet* did, after all, arrive in time for his birthday on December 12<sup>th</sup>. It was the Loudon family who received it at the Jonkershoek address they had posted it to themselves. It took Sam Loudon Sr. a few moments to recognise his wife's handwriting.

By that day, his birthday, Cassie herself was no longer at the Jonkershoek house. She was back in Cape Town with her mother, where she had no intention of living for the next two years.

On the morning of Sam's birthday, Cassie's mother asked her what she was doing sitting on her bed, staring into space.

'Absolutely nothing.'

Would she have remembered? Cassie thought. Of course she would have remembered. She would have written it on her desk calendar at the beginning of the year, and she would have transcribed all the dates from last year's calendar into the new one. She would probably have had it scheduled in her diary: *January 1, 09.00: transcribe dates into new calendar.*

'How are you holding up?'

'Fine, Mom.' 16.45: ask daughter how holding up.

That day, December 12<sup>th</sup>, it had been either thirteen days or twenty-two, depending on how you looked at it. But either way, it was his birthday, Sam's twenty-second birthday.

'Where did you go earlier?'

'Just a walk. I took a walk.'

'Sam Loudon phoned while you were out.'

Why say that. Why put it like that? Nathalie must have known it would make her jerk, it still seemed so possible. 'He did?'

'They're on their way again on the 19th.'

Exactly a month.

It was, she supposed, odd that Sam had called rather than Dianne. 'Did he say I should call back, or anything?'

'He said that there's still quite a lot of your stuff up at the house, and some of Sam's things too that you might want, and asked if you'd come and pick it up sometime next week.'

On December the 14<sup>th</sup>, Cassie went through to Stellenbosch to collect her belongings from the Jonkershoek house. She had taken her mother's car instead of the Citi Golf she had bought that year with her father's help, in case she needed the extra trunk space. This was a good thing, because when she left the Jonkershoek house again that afternoon, she had not only her own clothes, books, bedding, and toiletries in the car, but the five hundred and fourteen albums that comprised Sam's vinyl collection. She also had his record player.

Five hundred and fourteen of them, and this one, addressed to her in Dianne's hand, packaged by Dianne's hand, but unopened by Dianne: five hundred and fifteen.

Don't give up, Sam Loudon Sr. said to her as she left.

Nathalie had asked her if she wanted to have Christmas with the Caraways as usual. Her uncle's family and her only cousins, Lindl and Perfect Sean, and worse to come. Cassie said yes, that would be fine.

'You're sure?' said Nathalie Harris. It was a magnanimous gesture; one of a series of magnanimous gestures she had made in the last four weeks, soon to become impatient gestures, then desperate.

'I'm sure.' Christmas. Already Christmas. The Loudons had left. Mia would leave soon. She was alone and now it was Christmas and the Caraways, who had met Sam only once. More smiles to will, forcing what had always been reflex, the breath in, the breath out, and worse to come. Carols played by the Soweto String Quartet.

Worse to come because one day soon the shock would leave her. It would have to.

A memory in the first person: her field of vision divided into two colours, blue and a colour too bright to name, as she lay with her cheek in the sand, only her blue eye open to the light. The first of a series of dawns.

If you're up to it, Nathalie had said.

Worse would be staying in Rondebosch, just the two of them across the dining table from each other. Or no, it would be in the living room, side by side, with the TV mediating. It had been a month, and already she was anxious to get started at UCT. It would hit her soon, it would attempt to invade; this thing called grief which she had been told to expect – and she had to be ready and otherwise occupied. That space must not be vacant. By the time the shock left she would be busy. She would have things to worry about.

Lying on the floor of her room at dawn on the nineteenth with piles of Sam's music against the wall and plastic constellations glimmering above, and worse to come. One month. Or eighteen days, depending on how you looked at it.

And now, then, the dawn of the first day of the second month of year one of the new era. The first thought.

Her first thought was: and worse to come.

The record got to the end of the second side, and this time Cassie didn't turn it over. She listened to the needle thump-thumping over the locked groove, like a heartbeat.

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The Christmas before she had foregone the Caraways to join the extended Loudon tribe in Jeffrey's Bay, because it was the last Christmas they would be in the country. It was a beach house, but they called it the Christmas House, and as soon as they arrived they threw down their luggage beside their bunks and dispersed, as if under orders, to whichever activity most embodied, for each, the business of shedding the year. Everyone else there was an old hand. Cassie, the newcomer, was at sea.

'What shall we do now?' she said.

'Whatever we like,' said Sam Loudon.

They went with Ben and Ollie to play cricket on the beach.

The rest followed over the course of hours, in pairs or singly. The golden Loudons, like the first race of Man; Sam Sr. and his brother and sister and their children. Even the wives, Dianne and Moira, they could have been of the same blood; both were tawny and wiry and alike in their ability to get away with two-piece swimsuits despite five children between them. Even the communal Labrador, of whom Cassie never determined the real owner, even he was golden as the day is long.



By the end of the first day the Loudons had camouflaged into the landscape body and soul; bits of beach and mountainside animated and given the ability to laugh. When the wind and the waves lay still and flat the Loudons did too, stretched out in hammocks and on beds with the spines of paperbacks and magazines barrelled in one hand above their eyes. Everyone had a place to return to.

On the first dawn, Cassie awoke before anyone else.

She rose and walked the sand-buffed parquet between the bedrooms where the rest spilled out like light, then went to make coffee – still unsure of which cupboard hid what – and went out to sit on the stoep. She watched the beach segue from white to silver to gold as the sky turned milky and then yolk, and the sea rampaged peaceably beneath. This will be my place, she thought.

She awoke because the hammock was rocking. Sam looking down at her, one hand on the ropes, a day and a night's golden stubble on his jaw and his soft mouth curving. She smiled.

'Happy birthday,' she said.

He was twenty-one.

Besides the Labrador, Cassie was the only one there not worked into the family by blood or marriage, and besides the Labrador, the only one whose eyes were not the colour of any mood of the sea. Her blue eye was a mineral-blue, her brown eye was the only brown eye in the house. Cassie, fair-skinned, and Felix, ginger, were the only two who did not turn the colour of the place.

Felix Baum was a fixture in the living room, where he made his bed each night. He occupied the couch like a bear occupies a cave, growling in his lungs and reading Chomsky and scratching ruminatively at the freckles that had emerged teeming after his first two hours in the sun. Felix spent the mornings on the mountain, hiking with Sam, as they did in Jonkershoek. From these excursions they would return altered, Sam's eyes distant and vista-filled, as if they had been fitted with wide-angle lenses, Felix red-bearded, bull-necked, his face flaming. Cassie and Felix both avoided the beach in the hottest hours, and often when the house was empty of Loudons they would chat idly through the window that divided his place from hers.

Every day, Cassie was the first one in the house awake. Next to stir would be those of the Loudon boys that surfed: Ben, his cousin and best friend since birth, Ollie, and Ollie's older brother Zak.

Sam and Felix would be up an hour later. But she had this to herself; the colour flooding the beach at five-thirty. For this she was alone in consciousness, except for the Labrador lolling beside her. She fancied the two of them the guardians of this house, of the sleepers within. This is our post, she said to the dog. We have the dawn watch.

On Christmas Eve they ate kreef dived out of the sea by Zak and his father. Cassie tossed salads and sliced seed loaves and learned to make mayonnaise from scratch, mandalas of sand whorled on her calves, waiting for the boys to come back from the beach; from the mountain. She donned

boardshorts and went barefoot and convinced herself that this wasn't, couldn't be, her last time in this house.

Exactly a year later and she, Cassie was standing on the porch at the Caraways and wondering what it would feel like if she were to dive off it. It was far too short a fall to be fatal, unless she were to keep her arms at her sides and aim for the crown of the head like a prisoner. She might break her wrists. Six weeks in plaster and increased risk of rheumatoid arthritis after middle age. Perfect Sean came out and told her to come in for a bowl of Christmas pudding and a glass of port, if she wanted. They were about to unwrap the presents. Christmas pudding and port, and worse to come.

Thanks, she said, I'll come in just now.

In the kitchen, voices: her mother's and her aunt's.

It's really too much to bear. Christmas and his birthday so close together, and it's only been a month. I'd like to think this is the worst of it, but I just don't know. I don't know how to even begin to help her move on.

Her aunt saying, She's young. She'll bounce back. And in time, there will be another boy. Do you remember that age? One breaks more easily, but one mends more easily too.

Her mother saying, I just don't know.

Cassie thinking, I know.

They, she and Sam, had a room to themselves in Jeffrey's Bay.

You're not asleep? he said on the last dawn, when he surfaced to find her gazing at him, and for once she did not move her eyes to pretend she hadn't been.

No.

What's keeping you up?

I'm not sure.

Joy was keeping her up. Fear was keeping her up. He would leave, he would not leave. She had a year.

As soon as there was a voice in the house she rose from their bed.

They were in the kitchen, her dawn companions, amphibian, omnivorous, like selkies with their black skins half shed, neoprene sleeves trailing around their waists and their bare stomachs furrowing as they shoved slices of cheese into day-old croissants and then shoved these into their mouths.

Cassie made coffee and went out onto the stoep, as always. She curled herself into one end of the hammock. Her brown eye was closed, her blue eye saw the world divided into primaries. Blue and a colour too bright to name.

Inside, Zak making a joke and Ben responding, the laughter stealing fox-like from his throat, cautious of his unreliable pitch. He was sixteen, and had spent the year transforming; his height rocketing and his voice plummeting and entire boxes of Corn Flakes disappearing into his hollow legs at a sitting.

Then a high-pitched macaw-chatter from the living room: Tamsin was awake.

Don't you want to wait for everyone else, Tam? Tamsin's mother.

I'm allowed to open one. Dad said.

God, Tamsin, how truly grotesque. Is that what you *wanted*? Felix.

Don't swear at your cousin, Felix. His mother. Did they all get up at dawn on Christmas Day? Perhaps they did that here.

I wasn't swearing at her.

Tamsin's voice in the kitchen, now: she wanted to go swimming with the Boys, and was still trying to argue her way into their good graces by the time they came outside for their boards.

'No ways,' Ollie said over his shoulder to his sister as he emerged out into the light with his mouth full and his eyes squinting against the bright colour. 'We're not going to be able to look after you.'

Cassie had got to know him, Ollie, through these bleary-eyed daybreak coincidences. He was gorgeously shy; had not the slightest idea what to make of girls and their latter-day adulation. He had only started meeting her eye and greeting her by name that week. 'I don't need to be looked after,' said Tamsin, six. She waddled out after him, cradling a plastic unicorn with a flowing pink mane.

'I'll come along,' said Cassie. 'I'll watch you.'

They went down by the footpath to the sea. Cassie watched the surfers out towards the sky, and kept an eye on Tamsin as she shivered in the surf with the frills of her purple bathing costume fluttering around her thighs and her first-born unicorn clutched to her belly, until she lost courage and trotted back up to the house.

Cassie stayed to walk the length of the beach between the long brown fold mountains docked on either side of the bay. Between her feet the tiny spiral-shelled sea-snails shifted by the waterline, intent on their own purposes. Above her head a gull rode an updraft. She took a piece of driftwood and there where air and land and water met she wrote the words *Cassie Loudon*. And watched the next five waves wash it away, to make sure there would be no trace; that none but the gull would know.

## GHOST ROADS

If we analyse the principles of thought on which magic is based, they will probably resolve themselves into two: first, that like produces like, or that an effect resembles its cause, and second, that things which have once been in contact with each other continue to act on each other at a distance after the physical contact has been severed.

–James G. Frazer

It is useless to attempt to reason a man out of what he has not been reasoned into.

– Jonathan Swift

## Full Harvest Moon

*"If human violence cannot expend itself against the creature that originally inspired its fury, it will find a surrogate victim. The surrogate victim has committed no offence. It is simply vulnerable as well as available."*

As Cassie read these words for perhaps the fiftieth time she was sitting with her eyes raised to the wall of a study, formerly her father's, now her own, its oak-panelled surface almost entirely obscured by layers of post-its, transcripts, photocopies, page references, scraps of foolscap and newspaper clippings. The thing had grown up like Gaudi's cathedral; she hadn't intended for it to get out of hand.

She no longer held any illusions that there was hidden order to it, that it was an organised mess. For all that, she still took comfort in the space it took up in the world, this map of conquest; her Wailing Wall.

*The Butcher Boys*, those three loitering mutants, she had given pride of place, right in the middle, at eye level. They were flanked on one side by a picture of Bishop Tutu, and on the other by a photocopied article about the trial of the St. James Church Massacre bombers. Beneath the central image was a yellow post-it, on which she had written *Pharmakeus, pharmakeia, pharmakon, pharmakos*.

*They have spawned a glut of theory, they have called forth words like 'spawn' and 'glut'. They have summoned adjectives such as malevolent, maleficent, misbegotten. They have invoked the gerunds maimed, mutilated, disfigured. 'Dehumanised' is a popular choice.*

For her purposes, Cassie was using another: demonised.

*The artist refuses to explain their meaning, wrote Cassie. There is no need: Few artworks in South Africa have found such natural resonance with their audience, few have come closer to perfect symbolic rendering of a collectively intuited truth. They are most often supposed to represent the South African armed forces, the minions, the underlings, whose morality was warped by systematic indoctrination. But they need have no specific referent. Much like Revelation; this is always happening, has always happened, will always happen. History requires that we give them their horns.*

From the living-room, her mother's voice and a client's, looking through sample books. The client had the habit of finishing one's sentences with one. Cassie listened with one ear as the voices fell together and parted, fell together and parted.

She got up to close the door, sat down again.

*In order to serve as a plausible vessel for the sins of the community, the pharmakos must be ceremonially rendered equal to the task; it must be transmuted through ceremonial magic into something more than man or beast.*

*As the pharmakoi of the ancient world were ceremonially garlanded, or crowned, or beaten on the genitals with squills, we now garland and crown and beat them with words. Ritual has been replaced with rhetoric.*

The phone rang right next to her, but she waited for Nathalie to pick up in the kitchen.

'Cassie?'

*The appeal of metaphor is visceral; the possibility of salvation in synecdoche.*

'Cassie?' Her mother outside the study now. Leave me alone, leave me be.

'I'm sort of in the middle of something, Mom.'

But her mother walked into the room, holding the handset, and stood beside her desk.

'It's Detective Plaatjies on the phone.'

They had not heard from him in almost eight months.

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On a neat, if yellowing, square of lawn in Tooting Broadway, London, there lay a towel the colour of a very old tiger, and on the towel lay a girl, folded in on herself in a half-hearted foetal position, the back of one hand marking her place in a book as if in hope that its contents might be absorbed through her skin.

She had come outside with the intention to tan while reading (*not* to read while tanning), and as the sun gradually withdrew its unexpected gift of warmth her body had curled into itself from its spread-eagled rotisserie position like a time-lapse video of a flower closing.

What about this?

I'll finish it alone.

No, I mean. What will you use it for?

He pointed and she saw that there was, after all, a river.

Never fall asleep in the sun. But that was her mother's voice.

Mia?

That was her sister's.

And this was her favoured state: no longer quite asleep, not yet awake. Mia liked to sustain it when the day's demands allowed; to stay suspended viscosely between worlds and ferret through the humus of her mind, using that edge of consciousness as one uses the edge of a spade to turn over topsoil.

In her dream, she had been helping an old friend to build a boat. He did most of the work, but she passed him things, and kept him company, and watched as he worked the sander over the gunwale.

'Someone's calling you,' said Sam, and her mind began to settle in place behind her eyes.

Mia, *waar's jy*, intoned an overlay track on another level of consciousness - a memory; Helena calling her in from another garden in another year - and over that, just a hair beneath wakefulness, there was a lick of music on which she could eavesdrop if she didn't try.

'Mia!'

The strand snapped. She unfurled herself on the lawn, and rolled over, still unaware of what had pulled her out of her slumber.

'Mia!'

She ran her tongue across the roof of her mouth. '*Ja?*'

'*TELEfoon.*' Helena sounded exasperated, the emphasis on the first syllable suggesting that this was not the first time she had said this word.

'*Ek kom.*'

'Hurry up, it's Ma.'

Mia rose and wrapped the towel around herself, easing sideways through the sliding door. Sunblind and sleepblind, she entered the kitchen, one foot landing on the black tail of Scarlett, the peripatetic cat nominally owned by Mrs. Beel next door, and the other knocking over the half-full gesso tub which despite all Helena's admonitions she had once again left on the floor. The cat-foot landed in the gesso-slick as she scrambled to regain her balance. 'Mia?' called Helena again. Mia swore at Scarlett, abandoned the towel, and proceeded towards the lounge in her underwear, digitigrade, leaving in her wake a trail of white three-toed pugmarks.

'Hier's sy,' said Helena into the phone when she appeared at the lounge entrance. Helena's newly acquired fringe bounced as she turned her head. Mia had not yet made up her mind whether she liked it or not. 'Did you fall asleep?'

'I did.'

'You should never fall asleep in the sun.'

'What's wrong?'

'Talk to Ma.'

'Can you pass me the phone?'

'Why?'

'The carpet.' She showed Helena the sole of her primed foot.

Helena rose and stretched out the curlicues of the phone cord until Mia could get hold of the receiver. She did not sit down again. The two girls were facing each other across the threshold as their mother repeated the news. She was speaking in the same calm, careful voice she had used the day she found Mia's pet rat dead in its cage.

Inneke de Villiers had not let Mia see the rat; she had already put him in a tissue box that was sealed with sticky tape. She let Mia help bury him in the garden but would not let her look inside. She was too late with the cage in the bathroom though and Mia had seen the blood. 'Mia? *Is jy daar?*'

'Are they sure, Ma?'

There was a pause, hard to know if it was the lag was on the line or in her mother's thoughts. 'They say they still have to wait for the DNA tests, but the fingerprints match the ones they found on your camera.'

'Do I have to... do anything?'

'They want to fax you a photograph.'

About a month after they had laid Mia's rat to rest, Sonya had said she would tell Mia what happened as long as Mia swore on the Bible that she would not let their mother know. They looked around for a Bible, but there wasn't one in the house anymore, so she swore on her life instead. Sonya had then told Mia that the rat had died trying to escape. One corner of the cage had been wedged on top of the stand that held the exercise wheel, leaving a gap between the cage and the plastic tray that it fit into. The rat had managed to get its head through this gap, said Sonya, but before it got any



further its tail got caught in the rungs of the exercise wheel. In its struggles the rat had joggled the wheel, dislodging the cage and causing it to fall down on the rat's neck like a guillotine. The rat's head came right off, said Sonya. Mia had tried to imagine it but could not. She shivered, cold now in her underwear. 'Do you know what his name was, Ma?'

'His name was Isaac Butshingi.'

'Say it again?'

'Isaac Butshingi. B-U-T-S-H-I-N-G-I.'

She never knew whether or not to believe Sonya's stories anyway. Sometimes when she did, she would find out later that it had all been rubbish and Sonya would make fun of her for being so gullible, bending over with laughter and holding her knees until Mia felt a red-black colour in her head that made her want to hurt something. Helena would usually be on Mia's side, telling Sonya to stop teasing and that Pa said bearing false witness was one of the seven deadly sins, but at other times Helena had laughed too.

She looked across at Helena, and saw that she knew and that she was not laughing. Her mother now was offering her facts as if reading them from a list, aware that Mia didn't know what to ask.

Nineteen.

Gang warfare.

Isaac Butshingi, thought Mia.

A year gone by, this nameless fact, that nameless act, a gunshot, feet beating the earth, ragged breaths. And now, a name. Two words to contain it all, like bookends.

I should be there, thought Mia. For the first time since she had picked up the phone, she thought of Cassie. She opened her mouth to ask but her mother got there first.

'I spoke to Cassie just now,' said Inneke de Villiers. 'She says she'd like to talk to you.'

'I'll call her.'

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He looks even younger than he is, or was, the padded bones of his face as yet lacking the set and jut of a grown man's, the mouth puppyish and an optimistic *melkbaard* furring the jaw. The impression of youthful innocence is marred by the puckered white-pink scar that runs from his left temple across the closed lid of the left eye to a point just above the bridge of the nose. And also by the bullet-hole just above his hairline.

Isaac Butshingi had been shot dead in the centre of Hope Street, Kayamandi. Over a dozen witnesses had given statements to the effect that a fire-fight had taken place around four o' clock that afternoon, the detective had said. All of them, however, seemed to have developed either eye trouble or amnesia when it came to identifying the shooter.

Gang warfare, said Detective Plaatjies.

Which gangs, Cassie wanted to know.

'Ah, Butshingi was formerly a member of the Sexy Boys gang,' said the detective.

'And the other gang?'

'The other gang?'

'You said "gang warfare." Presumably at least two gangs are necessary to engage in gang warfare.'

'As far as we are aware, only the Sexy Boys gang was involved in this incident, Miss Harris.'

'So it was civil gang warfare?'

'Internal conflict, yes.'

'He was shot by someone in his own gang?'

'Yes.'

She looked again at the photo.

'And it was his own gang who did this to him, then. Beat him up.'

'We assume this.'

It had taken him a moment to translate this word in his head, *assume*. 'Why?'

'Cassie, I'm sure those details are classified,' said her mother.

'Can I keep this photo?' said Cassie, holding up the image of the bludgeoned man. Her mother smiling to excuse her odd daughter with her odd request and make sure that Detective Plaatjies didn't think they were an odd family.

'Ah, no, sorry,' said the Detective. 'We need to keep it.'

She was not sure why they had showed it to her; she hadn't asked for one, and they knew that unlike Mia, she had never laid eyes on him in the flesh, so she couldn't confirm or deny that they had their man. But of course it was him. Anyone could see that. The sketch that had been circulated among the stations and broadcast on the news had been astonishingly close. If anything, it looked more real than the photo. There was life in that graphite face. There was intention to do grievous bodily harm in those eyes.

Detective Plaatjies had a Wailing Wall of his own, and a copy of it was taped there. It stood out from amongst the other identikit sketches as a real person stands out among ghosts. *Donatello chez les fauves*. He would be able to take it down, now.

At around eight p.m. on the evening of November the nineteenth the year before, an unknown perpetrator, let's call him Isaac Butshingi, had attempted a robbery on the residence of Mnr. Manie Buurman of No. 12 Sloot St, Stellenbosch. His little girl, in bed with tonsillitis, had phoned her father to report that the dog was in a state of agitation and that she had heard glass breaking. Returning home in a hurry to find a window broken and his dog crippled by a blow to the spine, Buurman had alerted the police. Human blood had been found on the fur of the dog, in the garden, and on the fence. The

police had taken a statement, assigned a case number, and told him to count his blessings. An hour later Samuel Loudon was dead.

A year after that, so was his killer.

The smell of a day-old grass fire filtered in through the air-conditioning. Cassie leaned back in her seat and stared out at the acres of shacks. Pictured him walking along the verge where the township goats tore at the scrub. What would she do? Reach out and grab the steering wheel from her mother's grasp, watch his body crumple beneath the BMW's spotless white nose. The wheels going over him, ge-donk, ge-donk. Get out, kick him in the head, spit on him. He was dead and crushed and bloodied before she had fully become aware of the thought-process underway. Countless times she had played back the events of that night, altering the choices and details that might have left them all alive and whole and as magnificently innocent as they had been. But strangely enough, it was only now that it was too late that she developed an urge to revenge herself in person. Time and again she found herself embarking on and aborting the same loop of thought. The scenarios presented themselves without any effort on her part, like a showreel. He was in bed, sleeping. He was in the act of attacking someone. He was in the act of attacking her, and she slit him belly to throat with a knife. Each time she would have to remind herself, again, that someone else had done it for her.

Poetic justice. And yet the only score accompanying the sequence of visions in her mind were the words *it's not fair it's not fair it's not fair*.

'You're very quiet,' said Nathalie Harris, née Goddard. These were her mother's first words to her in the twenty minutes since they had left Stellenbosch. They were on the dodgy part of the highway. Nathalie had insisted on taking her through for the meeting with Detective Plaatjies. Cassie knew that her mother hated the N2, and that she got tense on the dodgy part, even in daytime, even when light-saturated clouds drifted pellucid as angels above. It was wise to get tense on the dodgy part of the highway, as the denizens of the shacks were known to throw stones at the cars. Still, on the whole, Cassie thought she would have preferred to go alone.

'I just have a headache, Mom.' She saw herself reflected in the lenses of the tortoiseshell-frame shades before her mother turned her eyes back to the road. Cassie turned back to the window, looking not through it but at the translucent reflection caught in the glass. She knew this face; was becoming accustomed to it. It was not the same as the one she saw when she looked at herself intentionally in mirrors. The other layers that gave it substance stripped away, and all that remained this ghost-mask, this scowling veil.

The memory of November was settling; the headache had done that much for her. It had started heaving as the car had turned onto the Baden-Powell exit that morning. Stellenbosch fed it images like tinder feeds a flame. Ben with his head lowered, picking at a loose thread on the suit he had worn to his matric dance earlier that year. Sam Sr's eyes, made like his sons' to look at faraway things in open spaces, red-rimmed now and turned inward. Dianne Loudon's mouth and eyes forming three surprised

circles in her face, one hand holding down her skirt, the other holding her hat on her head, as she was buffeted across the road by the great hot oven-gusts of berg wind that had ushered them all towards the church.

'At least it's done with now,' offered her mother; half statement, half plea.

'Yes...' Done with. She had waited this long for the day she would see him, learn his name, point to him and say, *you. You did this. Why?* And now, she never would.

When she had received the phone-call from Detective Plaatjies the day before, a temporary elation had flooded her which at the time she had mistaken for the real thing, but which she later recognised to have been nothing more than the routine effects of the response engineered by evolution to deal with shock. The flimsy high had subsided after an hour or so. By the time she had spoken to Mia that evening she had already sunk into the first stages of the condition she was in now. It was an emotion that she couldn't put a name to, but she knew at once that, unlike her first reaction, it was built to last.

'He was only nineteen,' was the first thing Mia had said.

'I know,' said Cassie.

Which meant he was eighteen when he did it. She had been right when she guessed that this above all would grip Mia, as it had gripped her. It seemed impossible. That he was so young. No: that he was younger than they were.

Later that long afternoon the rain had come, and the earthworms with it, abandoning the flooded ground and piling inch-thick and helpless in the storm-gutters with the water blatting down on their skins.

Stellenbosch was Mia's face as hard as hearthstone and the colour of ash as she stood, small and fierce, in the downpour.

'Love...'

Cassie became aware of the fact that she was gripping the leather upholstery with both hands and breathing oddly.

'I'm all right.' She turned on the radio and focused as hard as she could on the exciting news that at long last, there was a banking service available dedicated to *her* specific needs.

In among the usual portfolio, there was a new image, and to this her mind returned again and again. The shattered face, the high swollen cheekbones, the shadow of fuzz on his upper lip, the scar from the older wound that had cost Sam his life.

*Vulnerable as well as available*, thought Cassie.

## Full Hunter's Moon

It was a full moon that night. That's why they stayed. Cassie would always be grateful afterwards, if one could be grateful for anything that had happened during those hours, that it had been Sam's suggestion. 'There's a full moon tonight,' said Cassie. But he had said, 'Let's stay till it's risen.' His words. His.

It was the end of November and by four p.m. the heat that had been gathering in the valley all day was pouring back out of the mountains like sweat. Cassie, leaning against a plane tree, was giving serious thought to stripping off her shirt. Surely it would be worth a handful of disapproving glances to be free of the long sleeves that she had selected in a moment's thoughtless glance at that morning's short-lived mist.

As the minutes slouched by her knees began to buckle. She allowed her back to scoot lower and lower down the trunk of the plane tree, until she was slouched on the lawn with her head nodding forward, pleasantly stupefied by the insectoid fusion of melodies that emanated from the not-quite-soundproofed rooms inside the Konservatorium.

She had forgotten sunglasses and she squinted obliquely into the vapour shimmer each time she heard the door squeal open to release another student. They emerged from the shelter of the building in ones and twos, deflating visibly with murmurs of *magtig* and *Jislaaik* as they found themselves immediately enclosed in four solid walls of heat. Down the stairs they toiled, shifting the weight of their mysteriously shaped black cases from one arm to the other like the portable coffins of so many small, malformed children.

She recognised a few of them; knew a few names, others she knew by instrument. Someone lifted a hand in greeting from afar. Johan *kwaai-wange* Walbrugh, tenor saxist, Sam's sometime jamming buddy. She waved back. *Kwaai*, my broer.

They were a motley crew, lacking the dogged individualism to be found among the students of the other humanities departments, and yet in the end more diverse. Unlike the drama students, uniform in their self-conscious extroversion, or the fine art students, united in existential angst, the music faculty seemed to attract all kinds: mousy and hip, conventional and eccentric.

She scratched and adjusted her clothing, uncomfortably aware of the rivulets of perspiration fingering down her spine and pooling biliously in the reservoir created by the hem of her skirt. She was now lying half-supine like a *bergie* with her chin an inch from her chest and her arms folded across her stomach. Legs moved by in jeans and skirts, shadows falling on her and passing, falling and passing. Through her half-closed eyes she sensed the odd face inclining in her direction.

*Dis daai ander meisie.*

*Watter meisie?*

*Sam se meisie.*

*Viool-Sam of Klavier-Sam?*

*Klavier-Sam.*

As Sam told it, the one trait common to all was not something one could glean from their dress sense or demeanour. It was the single-minded ambition of each to be better at their chosen instrument than the rest. The community of professional classical musicians in South Africa was tiny, badly funded, and savagely competitive, and the incoming generation knew it. From third year onwards, cellist was pitted against cellist, flautist against flautist. Alliances were formed, plans laid for string quartets and chamber music ensembles. Lean years were anticipated; there was strength in certain numbers. Four. Five. As everyone was required to learn keyboard skills, these connoisseurs tended to look down their noses at those like Sam who chose to dedicate themselves only to piano. Sam and Johan and the rest of their circle laughed it off: they did not want to play with the Cape Town Philharmonic Orchestra, they did not want to audition for Pop Idol. They cared only for jazz.

On a whim Cassie tried to extract from the muted bedlam the piece that Sam had chosen for his practical exam. Bach, of course. Classical music is supposed to be classical because it can never be overplayed, but boy, was she sick of that piece. She had just convinced herself that she could distinguish the intricate coda that he had beaten into submission during the preceding weeks, and was imagining his fingers tripping across the keyboard, the furrowed brow above eyes stretched wide, the piston-like hunch and spring of the upper body that extreme musical concentration seemed to require, when he threw himself down on the grass beside her.

'Hey!' she said, indignantly.

'What do you mean 'hey'?' he said, smiling.

'I've been watching the door.'

'I came out the other side.' He went barefoot to class in summer, or, when the tar was hot, he wore flip-flops, which he took off as soon as he was indoors and stuffed in his bag. But he had, as a huge concession to the occasion, worn dress shoes to his exam, and these he now removed in two fitful motions, using his big toes as shoehorns, at the same time shrugging off his blazer. His features were set humorously in the contemptuous relish of one enacting a task long anticipated and imagined in loving detail. 'Why are you hiding behind a tree?' he said, making a bundle of the discarded garments while his dextrous simian feet went about ridding each other of his socks.

'I'm not hiding. It was the only piece of shade. The steps are too hot. So...?'

'So what?'

'So *how did it go*?'

'It could have been better.'

'You always say that. I mean, what did they think of it?'

'Hard to say. I'm not sure they were awake. Not all of them simultaneously, anyway.'

'Samuel.'

'It went okay.'

She could tell he was pleased with himself. He was now removing his tie. There was such a relentless momentum to his undressing that Cassie half expected him to continue on to his pants and underwear and walk forth in prelapsarian splendour. But, once he had his shirt off - she envied him his breastlessness - he rolled over onto his back on the grass, heaved a sigh, and mumbled blissfully: 'Over... overoverover.'

A more complete account of this most crucial hour would no doubt emerge over days, once he had the distance to make a story of it. Maybe tonight, much later, he would let slip an observation or a few details, in the guise of a joke. For the full report, she would very likely have to wait until he had his results. 'We should celebrate,' was all she said now.

'It's too hot. I just want to curl up into a ball and sublime.'

'We could find somewhere shady,' said Cassie, noting in passing a frowning lecturer who was noting, in passing, Sam's half-nakedness. She wondered if he had policy on his side. There was bound to be a rule against going shirtless on the Konserv lawn.

'Let's go for a swim,' said Sam, with his arms crossed over his eyes.

'Where?'

'Coetzenberg.'

'I don't have a membership, you know that.'

'Not the pool, the dam.'

'Oh, right. But we don't have any swimming stuff.'

'Who needs it?'

'There might be people.'

'I have my board-shorts in the car.'

'They'll fall off me.'

'You can borrow something from Mia.'

'We're inviting Mia?'

'Aren't we?' said Sam, smiling. *Sam Loudon had a smile that could restore your faith in humanity, Felix Baum would write in Die Matie two weeks later.*

'I suppose we are.'

\*\*\*

She wakes up to find the stark oval of her mother's night-time face looming over her bed. Nathalie's eyes look bald and naked in the dark. Cassie is perplexed to find her own eyes are thick and

gummy with tears and her throat is sore. What is it? she croaks. You were making strange noises. No, I wasn't. Yes you were. It woke me up. Was it a nightmare? I don't know. I don't know what you're talking about.

\*\*\*

They took a bottle of cheap champagne and a blanket and a cardboard boxful of the season's first strawberries and headed towards the mountain in Sam's car.

'Shall I park by the gym?'

'No, park up at the stables, rather.'

There were no other cars. They filed between the paddock fence and the forest edge, towels over shoulders, Cassie ahead with the blanket bundled up in her arms, Mia in the van with the provisions and her camera slung around her neck, Sam in the middle.

The Coetzenberg horses cast them aloof glances as they passed. 'Moo,' said Mia, waving strawberries towards various politely interested noses.

There was a foal in the paddock too, craning his neck around his dam's flexing hindquarters to get a better look at them. Sam took a strawberry from the box and proffered it, whistling low. The foal trotted closer to them, then bethought itself and sprang away towards the adults. He laughed.

Mia called it *kleintjie* and spoke to it softly, as she spoke to all animals, in Afrikaans. Cassie, reminded of Swift's remark that horses should be addressed in High Dutch, thought it apt. High Dutch for horses, Kitchen Dutch for foals. Baby-talk. 'Save some for us,' she said.

They continued along the shady path towards the dam. Cassie striding ahead, Sam in the middle, now wearing only boardshorts and thrashing at underbrush with a slim blue gum bough he had picked up by the roadside, Mia trailing behind in her flip-flops, telling Cassie slow down, there was no train, and why must she always *mission* everywhere? But Sam overtook her at the steep and fissured bank, leaping with sure abandon from one boulder to the next by the grace of his prehensile toes.

'The water's low,' he said. It had been a dry year.

They stuck the champagne in the wet sand where the water could lap over it. Mia spread out the blanket and sat down.

'It says *Swem streng verbode*,' said Cassie, standing at the water's edge and looking at the sign that had been posted by the lake.

'Ignore it,' said Sam from the shallows, skimming a flat pebble across the lake's surface.

'There is an actual skull and crossbones on it,' Cassie pointed out.

'I've been swimming here since I was seven, and nothing's happened to me yet... Did you see?' Five bounces! He turned round, grinning. Sam Loudon Jr. He was overdue for a haircut by three months, and the joy of freedom was radiating out of him. The night before he had played till one in the morning. He had risen again at five and played until eight.



They stripped off their outer layers and waded out to join him. Gasps of pleasurable shock, the benediction of gooseflesh.

\*\*\*

She lies perfectly still, mentally tracing the neatly packed folds of those two grey-pink fists, layers upon layers of tissue, a hundred thousand million cells, her personal universe enclosed in bone. The fists clench, the cerebral knuckles pale. Pain, she has discovered, is colourless. It is pure distilled light and one sees it from *behind* one's eyes. But it keeps the memories at bay. They stand no chance against this.

She has turned her bedroom into a womb for the duration. No light, no sound, just a heartbeat. She feels certain that if someone were to walk in, open the curtains, say a single word to her, her head would explode like an overripe melon. For months she has felt soothingly disconnected from reality, slipping through it like some frictionless wisp of ether, barely more substantial than air. A cloud. She longs to be a cloud. A collection of molecules held together by nothing more than an accident of elevation and temperature. Now, cast back into the world of sensation, she wonders how she could ever have doubted that she was still of this world. *Doleo ergo sum*. In this moment she is excruciatingly extant, and like a new-born child, she feels her agony is no longer a thing apart. The walls hurt. The bed aches. The earth one storey below screams blue murder. The world surrenders its boundaries under the onslaught of her synaptic cacophony. A cloud, she tells herself. You are a cloud.

'Are you hungry, Cassie? There's macaroni and cheese,' says her mother when she stumbles downstairs three hours later.

She watches her mother's lips moving, rewinds and replays the sounds in her head. *Ah rew hung greek ass either smack a row knee ant she's*. Something hot, edible, yellow and white.

'Thanks Mom,' she says. 'A bit later.'

\*\*\*

Sam could hold his breath underwater for two and a half minutes. Cassie hadn't believed him when he first told her that, so she timed him in the bath, and he held it for three.

The lake was hers alone now, and she was deep within it, her eyes open to ochre shot through with gold. She ascended slowly, releasing streamers of bubbles and listening as they burst high above, *pizzicato*. She was trying to pinpoint the divisions in the layers of water: very cold, cold, cool, and the top layer warm. She felt the meniscus breaking, drew breath and sank again, and rose. Drew breath. Sank, sculling with her hands to counteract her buoyancy. Very cold, cold, cool, and here and there a rogue band of warm.

She surfaced and drew breath and opened her eyes.

She did not think she had been submerged for very long, but in that time, the light had changed. The stretch of water between herself and the shore had changed colour, from dark to light, as if it had been turned inside out. It was the colour of white gold, or stationary sheet lightning. Everything beyond was glowing as if lit from the inside. The mountains had become *Mountains*. The lake was a *Lake*. *The Lake*. The only lake. Beyond was *The Forest*. If she were to inhale this light, it would infuse her veins, or fuse them, she would be an electric angel, a thunder god. I've seen this before, she thought.

At the water's edge her boyfriend and her best friend sat in a pool of the stuff, this diamond light. and she remembered where she had seen light like this before, and how her father said, it's the ultraviolet. It was in the Cederberg.

Mia was pointing that antique camera of hers at Sam, and Sam had not yet noticed. Cassie floated, her lower lip below water and her top lip above, unconsciously making speedboat noises.

This light. What year would that have been, she wondered. That was the year he came back from his sabbatical, and they took a trip to the mountains together, she and her mother and father. He had just returned from two years in Scotland, and when he came back he lay on the rocks in the sun like a lizard for three hours straight with a *dakkie* of tinfoil over his nose, before rolling over, and over again, without once opening his eyes, into the water, belly-first. He was under for so long, hours and hours, she thought of the awesome capacity of his lungs and hoped that one day when she would be able to stay underwater like that too, so long. She waited and waited for him to emerge, neck stretched up and eyes squinting over her nose for any hint on the water's surface of distress down below, and then he emerged, and it was not until that moment that he was really back from that cold and distant country.

Mia had flipped onto her knees and was walking forward on her hands, stretching out an arm to take something from Sam. She sat back, cross-legged, her head bowed, very like a child, her child's body centred fully on the thing she cradled.

She supposed she must look small to them too, but they weren't looking at her. She had a fleeting impression that the light surrounding them was more solid than they were, stronger, less ephemeral. The impression was fleeting only because the light itself was, abruptly negating this little fancy by at that moment fading, a shadow cast over everything, or not so much a shadow, as just an absence. If it had not happened she would never have thought anything was missing.

It will be fine, she thought. It will be fine. They had all lived together in the same *house* before, the three of them, for a year, and it had been, for the most part, fine. The city could hold the three of them. There would be many people in between, streets and pressures.

Besides which, it had *a*lways been the three of them.

Cassie felt a wave of complicitness from a distance, a wave of fellow-feeling, and a motherly, no, a fatherly, sense of protectiveness, an urge, possibly champagne-induced, to reach out her hands across that bolt of bright water and cup her hands around them, frail lightblown puppets on the shore, as Mia was cupping whatever fragile thing Sam had just given her. They looked so small from here. A wave of, why not call it love and be done with it, a wave of love. Both a wave and a particle. She rowed herself towards them.

With a measured good will she began revising her idea of the year ahead.

'Shall we get going?' she said when she had joined them on the shore. Murmurs of assent were sounded, and they began gathering their belongings.

'Quite a sunset,' said Sam.

'There's a full moon tonight,' said Cassie, wringing water from her hair.

'Let's stay a while longer then,' said Sam. 'At least until it's risen.'

\*\*\*

She finds herself shaking uncontrollably in the middle of her postcolonialism seminar. She looks at Professor Mashiya. Words are tumbling out of his mouth, out of his hand through the felt pen and onto the whiteboard. Coeval time, he says, and writes it. COEVAL TIME. The sounds have disappeared, but the marks on the board, meaning the same thing, are still there. Isn't that simply amazing, thinks Cassie. The room fisheyes, warping suddenly in front of her vision, and she throws both palms onto the table to steady herself. Eyes turn in her direction. Is everything okay? asks Professor Mashiya.

Excuse me, she says, I have to go.

EX! CUSE! ME!

She stumbles to the nearest bathroom, where she sits staring at the *LoveLife: It's worth waiting for!* sign on the inside of the cubicle door for twenty minutes before she can gather her wits enough to leave the building.

Fighting the wind all the way up University Avenue towards the parking lot, her hair flies again and again into her mouth. A boy in a Billabong shirt watches her past the Leslie building.

That chick's got issues, bru, she hears him mutter to his friend, but he drops his eyes when she is abreast of him. They always do.

\*\*\*

I'll miss this, was what he said in the space of the hour that only the two of them were in the water, lying suspended in the doubled cosmos. The moon had clambered out of the treetops, and now it

loomed perilously over the lake, as if gathering the courage to throw itself in. Goodbye, cruel orbit, thought Cassie.

She was going to ask him what he would miss, but instead she said, Orion.

'The belt is Alnilam, Alnitak, and Mintaka,' he provided, but he got stuck on the shoulders, and that made it her turn. 'The Seven Sisters,' said Sam.

'The Pleiades, you mean. Electra, Maia, Taygete, Alcyone, Celaeno, Sterope, and Merope. There's also their parents, Atlas and Pleione.'

'So there are nine stars in that one, not seven?'

'Actually, there are about five hundred in that cluster.'

'Wow.'

'The Southern Cross.'

'Acrux, Jewel Box -'

'Now you're just making stuff up.'

'I am not.'

'Anyway, I've decided I prefer not to know.'

'Why?'

'Because to name them is to try and tame them, and I like them wild.'

'What do you mean, how is it taming them?' He was holding onto her feet now, she floating, he propelling her.

'Knowing them. Owning them. Ticking them off the list of the great unknown and saying, "dealt with. Under control. Man has got it covered."'

'You think that's why we named them? To control them?'

'Sure, or to make us feel as if we could, one day. Naming them is the first step; it's a way of saying it's on our To-Do list. Don't you agree?'

'Not at all.'

'Why do we name them, then?'

'It's more of a To-Think-About list, if you ask me. If it wasn't for all that - ' she waved towards the sky, unbalancing herself, and had to make rapid wax-on wax-off motions with her arms to prevent her head from going under. 'If it wasn't for all that out there, we might never have asked any questions at all. Or -' she spat out a mouthful of water. Sam grinned. 'Or to put it another way, philosophy begins in wonder.'

'In wonder, you say?' he smiled.

'I don't. But Plato does.'

'I like wonder.'

*Sam had a knack for discovering the transcendent properties of all people, all situations, and all things, Felix Baum would write.*

This was something that Cassie would realise too late.

\*\*\*

She forgets to brush her teeth. She forgets to put milk her coffee. She forgets to put verbs in her sentences. The headaches grow worse.

I can't sleep, says her daughter. It's because I can't sleep.

You do sleep. I know you do because I hear you dream.

I don't dream.

I think you should see Dr. Thorpe.

I'm fine, Mom.

YOU! HAVE! TO! SEE! SOME! ONE!

You

have

to

see

someone.

*Ewe have two cease um wan.*

Just snap out of it, says Nathalie Harris, until one night she finds her daughter passed out in her room, asleep.

\*\*\*

Cassie peered back towards the bleached shore, and was surprised to realise that they had drifted out far into the centre of the lake. She could see their belongings, a small pale pile in the vivid moonlight near the water's edge.

They had left Mia alone on the shore. Mia had said it was too cold to swim again, had told them to go ahead, she wanted to sit here, somebody needed to look after their stuff now that the sun had gone down. But Mia was not there. 'Where's Mia?' said Cassie.

'Higher up,' said Sam, pointing. Mia had hiked back up to the top of the ridge, and stood silhouetted against the overbright sky. 'We should go back.'

'Wait,' said Cassie. 'Not yet.'

Sam's eyebrows, harbouring waterdrops, were raised to ask why.

'Kiss me,' said Cassie.

For an answer, he filled his lungs and ducked under the water.

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'How's Dad? Doing well? Good.'

The man indulging in this rather touching linguistic convention that induces people to speak as if one's parents are their parents too was Dr. Thorpe, the family GP. He shone a light in the brown eye, then the blue.

'And Mom tells me you're doing philosophy? Isn't that fabulous. What's your thesis topic?'

'It's about goats.'

'Fantastic. Please look right into the light, that's super.' He was in bedside-o-matic mode. She followed his cues obligingly until the examination was over.

'Wellll,' said Dr. Thorpe. 'There aren't any symptoms to merit breaking out the big guns.'

'You mean an MRI?'

'And a PET and a CAT.'

And a hamster and a staffie puppy.

'Given the circumstances and the other symptoms, I think we can safely assume that you're having run of the mill mixed tension migraines.'

'Given the circumstances?' said Cassie.

'Yes. Given the circumstances, I think there's a possibility that these headaches are psychosomatic.'

'Psychosomatic?' said Cassie. She doubted she had the imagination to manufacture all that pain by herself.

Is this what I've chosen? thought Cassie, sitting there with her legs dangling off the edge of the white bed, before this man she had known for almost two decades and who had seen her naked as baby, child and adult, being told that her headaches were all in her head.

He sat down now, so that she was surveying him from a slight advantage of height, and looked her in the eyes in a different way, to observe her mind rather than her brain. 'I understand you lost someone dear to you recently.'

'Yes...'

'And then you moved from Stellenbosch to U.C.T, is that correct?'

'That's right.' How much had her mother told him already?

'Would you like to tell me about that?'

'About U.C.T, or my boyfriend's murder?' A real conversation-stopper, that one, usually. Like the time when she was three and had called her mother a *poes*. She had heard a man *bergie* saying it to a woman *bergie* and had no idea what it meant, but boy, did it get a reaction.

She knew there were ways of saying it that were easier to hear, but she hated 'he passed away,' and 'he's no longer with us'. Even 'he died' was too weak. If she had to deal with the fact, her interlocutors could damn well deal with the word.

'When exactly was your boyfriend murdered?' He did not flinch. Interesting. You can dish it out, but can you take it? Cassie could take it. 'November the 19<sup>th</sup> last year.' Or November the 30<sup>th</sup>, depending on how you looked at it.

'And your symptoms commenced?'

'I stopped sleeping well about a month and a half ago,' she said, thinking about something else altogether. When she was eleven, she was remembering, she had had a serious allergic reaction during one of her mother's dinner parties to the first and last chocolate-covered Brazil nut she had ever eaten. Dr. Thorpe had come to their house in the middle of the night, stuck a needle in her butt-cheek and Saved Her Life.

Dr. Thorpe was saying something about reactive psychosis. She was sure she had heard the expression on *Days of our Lives*. Then he used another term, and the Hollywood unreality of the situation achieved new heights, or depths. Post-traumatic stress disorder, he said. 'With this sort of delayed reaction there is often some sort of a trigger event,' Dr. Thorpe said. 'Something that brings about a re-entry into the emotional state that you were in at the time of the trauma. An anniversary, perhaps, or a similar experience, ah, experienced by you, or even someone close to you.'

'Nothing like that has happened.' For weeks afterwards, she remembered, she had thought she was in love with him. She smiled inwardly, discovering an unexpected tenderness towards that benighted former self, and at the same time forming a suspicion - unverifiable, really, but intriguing - that she had not previously been aware that a record of this infatuation existed in the annals of her memory. That this was the first time, ever, that she was recalling it, unwrapping it, breaking the seal.

Dr. Thorpe wore a patient, expectant expression. She returned it, muscle for muscle.

'Your mother said that the investigation into your boyfriend's death was discontinued recently,' he suggested.

Cassie nodded. 'That's right. The police found the body of his murderer.'

Dr. Thorpe sighed affably. 'Did you ever consider that that might have something to do with all of this?' he said gently.

'All of this?'" repeated Cassie.

He leaned against his desk, his fingers lolling over the rim. Her white knight, bearer of the vorpal syringe. The machinations of her eleven-year-old subconscious were now touchingly transparent: the Brazil nut episode, and her ensuing cathexis of Dr. Thorpe, had taken place just after her father, also a doctor, had left the country. Elementary.

'I think that you have suffered what is commonly referred to as a nervous breakdown.'

'Wha-at?' she guffawed, her attention hurtling back to the present. 'No, I haven't.'

'You went through a terrible experience, and you suffered a loss which you don't seem to have dealt with adequately,' he continued. 'Then you transplanted yourself to an unfamiliar environment, where you took on a heavy workload.'

'I just have migraines, Lots of people get migraines.'

'I hear you also took rather a lot of sleeping pills.'

So her mother *had* told him. He paused, waiting for further argument. She had none to give him.

'I know. I know it was stupid. I was just so tired.'

'You are very lucky your mother was there.'

He spared her the word. Or perhaps he was working his way up to it.

When Nathalie had revived her, she had thrown up for three hours. Cassie had succeeded in convincing her mother that she didn't need to go to the hospital. She hadn't taken that many, she said. She hadn't meant anything by it. Really. It was not intended to be what it looked like it was intended to be.

'For the time being,' he went on, 'I'd like to put you on something for the depression and the anxiety attacks, and we'll see how that goes, but it's not a long-term solution.'

'What are you going to put me on?' Oh God. Was her mother going to tell her father about the sleeping pills? Or had she already?

'Ah, we'll see how we do with Zoloft.'

'Is that a serotonin reuptake inhibitor?'

'Yes, it is.'

'Aren't there risks of persistent adverse neurological effects after discontinuation?'

Dr. Thorpe sighed slightly less affably. 'Not if the dosages are properly managed. And not if you're carefully monitored.' He took out his prescription pad. 'I'd also like to give you a reference.'

'For a neurologist?'

He took off his glasses. Wrinkles encroached on his eyes from all directions, like those aerial pictures of dried up waterholes in the Sahara. She hadn't noticed him getting old. 'For a psychiatrist, Cassie.'

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When Mia left South Africa was really when it had started, the gradual dislocation from herself. Cassie felt as if she were becoming translucent, weightless. She had figured out how to engage in a critical mass of social contact; just enough to appear civil, but not so much that she might actually be requested to *involve* herself with anything or anyone beyond the immediate demands of her studies. So she smiled when necessary, said how are you and fine thank you, remembered not to stare too hard or too long at people who spoke to her - too much eye contact rather than too little had always been her vice, so she compensated - and for the rest remained as anonymous as possible. Cassie the



Friendly Ghost. Mia had been her last point of connection with the living, waking world. They were like a pair of cogs, Mia grooving into the world, Cassie into Mia. She began to understand the expression 'get a grip.' It was a question of traction, of having enough rough edges exposed to snag onto other people's rough edges and move her along, and since Mia had left, she had allowed herself to become coated in a mucilaginous layer of defensive apathy. She liked it that way. It made the Samlessness of her world more bearable, and her role in it less defined.

*She's young, she'll bounce back, she'll find someone new in due time.* She had heard it, or overheard it, more times than she could count; from her parents, her relatives, her parent's friends, her own friends. She was determined to prove them wrong. With bitter relish, she would utterly fail to bounce back.

'Has it occurred to you, that you have been putting yourself under an immense amount of pressure not to complete the grieving process successfully?' said Dr. Patel, her psychiatrist.

'I understand that now, yes.'

'This farcical mission you've created for yourself has prevented you from recovering. Now that the case is closed, and your last chance of a definable external end-point to the saga has been removed, your mind is revolting against the moratorium you've placed on it. It wants to be emotionally responsive again. If you'll allow it to.'

'I see.' Dr. Patel glanced up at her, his perfect black brows sloping interrogatively, and Cassie realised that she might have sounded sarcastic. 'I, ah... I will try to allow it to,' she said.

Mmmm, said Dr. Patel, scribbling briefly on his notepad. 'Let's go back to that night.'

That night.

She had started with the moment they decided to go to the dam. She did not tell Dr. Patel about the light. Instead she said, we should never have stayed after dark. She told him about Sam saying he would miss this, and that Sam had wanted to see the moon rise.

What would he miss?

What?

You said your boyfriend said he would miss this.

Oh. He was talking about the stars, I think. I don't know. We were going to London, so I assumed he meant the stars. We were talking about them.

I see.

He rose to open a window, and she craned her neck to glance at the notepad on his desk. She could not make out the words, but she saw that his handwriting was punctiliously even, the capitals flourishing hectically before being railroaded by tiny, cramped lower case, revealing chronic overachievement shadowed by unfulfilled ambition, possibly a vestigial persecution complex skulking in his extensors. He had also drawn an isosceles triangle.

At the window, he drew breath. 'I'd like you to start keeping a journal,' he said.

'A journal?' said Cassie. 'Of what?'

'It doesn't matter. Your thoughts. Your hopes. Your dreams.'

'I don't remember my dreams.' What the heck had she said that might have induced him to draw a triangle? She replayed their conversation thus far in her head and scoured it for evidence of a triangular subtext.

'No, I meant your aspirations. Your ambitions. You have ambitions?'

'Of course.'

'What do you plan to do with your life?'

'Sam and I were going to -'

'No, *your* plans. Now.' Dr. Patel seated himself again and rolled his pen to and fro beneath a smooth palm.

Cassie tried to think of a response, but she found herself watching him as if from a distance, as if he was a television programme rather than a person. She was fascinated by his precise side-parting, his poreless brown skin, marred by never a crease. She imagined that it would be cool to the touch, slippery in a dry way, like parachute material. He, Dr. Patel, had asked her if she cried. She wanted to ask: *do you?*

'I don't know,' she responded at last. 'I'm not sure anymore.'

'Think about that for next time,' said Dr. Patel, looking at his watch.

## Full Beaver's Moon

Cocooned beneath the skin of the lake, they did not hear the first scream, only its echo. As they emerged it sprang back off the mountains like a winged thing trapped, leaving the bowl of air above the lake ringing.

'Mia!' yelled Sam. Looking to the top of the ridge they could see the tiny figure struggling with a larger one. Sam struck out towards shore as she screamed again. Mia's assailant was dragging her away from the dam towards the forest. Then the tangled shadows disappeared from view. A few moments passed, and then there was a third, briefer cry, brought to an abrupt end on the upswing like the yip of a jackal on the rut. The sound had a different, muted quality this time, and Cassie knew without thinking about it that he had her among trees. She tried to call out, choked on a mouthful of water, coughed and spluttered and gathered herself to follow in Sam's wake. Sam had already covered a third of the distance. Precious seconds passed, a minute, two, and then he was wading, then running. Cassie had recovered herself, was throwing her shoulders into it, was gaining, but he was already on the shore before her feet hit dirt and she watched him leap up the bank in two great strides, to the left, to the right, moonlight shivering on his wet torso. 'Hey! You!' she heard him shout, one word for each leap. The words ricocheted off the rim of the lake like exclamation points, and then he too was over the ridge and out of sight. Her own breaths, the distance no shorter. Further away, with the same deadened forest acoustics, filtered through the water her ear canals had collected, she heard his voice. Mia, he said. The gun, Mia!

No, thought Cassie. No, come back.

It was the last time she heard Sam's voice.

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Cassie opened her eyes to find that the laptop screen had gone blank. Her screensaver floated off one end of the screen and back on at the other.

*bowl, n. a hemispherical vessel, wider than it is deep, it said.*

A definition one could crawl into and curl up in. A perfectly balanced equation on either side of that comma. So it is written, so it shall be done.

She pressed space to get her work back, and glanced at the computer clock. It was long past midnight. She tried to recap, drawing threads together. Her mind had been tracking a chain of logic,

only to come to a conclusion she recognised as being the same conclusion she had come to before, by the same route, and discarded.

*We can think of a ritual as a dramatised metaphor, she read.*

*She continued writing. .The ancient world credited dramatised metaphors with literal, functional power: to wit, magic. The modern world has done away with magic, but the will-to-ritual itself is not discarded so easily.*

*In the absence of acceptable magic and established rituals, we devise our own. The metaphors, however, remain much the same.*

*To appease the gods, we still prepare a sacrificial offering. To exorcise demons, we still require the Gadarene Swine.*

Her IM alerted her to new mail. Glad of the interruption, she launched the browser, and closed with token loathing a popup inviting her to *LIVE AND WORK IN THE USA! (Congratulations! You've got 1 Free year!* it announced with little starbursts in red, white and blue). She logged into her webmail. There were, in fact, three new mails, the first from Mia, sent this minute, the second from Professor Mashiya, sent at two. The third, sent at four a.m. South African time, claimed to be from Samuel Loudon, which probably meant from Dianne.

She opened the second one first.

*Dear Cassie*

*I'm sorry I am only replying to your email now. I have been in Mauritius. Regarding your question: your synthesis of the work of Fanon, Girard and Frazer w. regard to random violence in 'post traumatic' SA is certainly thought-provoking. However, I can't help but notice that your most recent chapter seems to work against the thesis of your thesis. You have spent an inordinate amount of time and/or space (cf. Derrida) on the rhetoric surrounding the murder of Amy Biehl, and while the analysis is incisive (and EXTREMELY in depth), I am not sure what it has to do with the bit about the goat.*

*P.S Why don't you relax and enjoy the holidays?*

Cassie read it in his voice: the meddler of Amy Biehl, random violins.

She spent half an hour constructing a response to the effect that sound research methodology obliges one to discard hypotheses as and when they prove untenable, and that her work should thus lead her whither it may, and not, *pre hoc*, in the direction she had expected. Then she deleted everything she had written, went back to her inbox, and opened Mia's email.

*Hi Cass*

*I'm so glad to hear you're doing better. When can I call? When can we talk?*

Oh, those De Villierses. Everything had to be discussed to death. What was there to say?

*Tonight I know you must be feeling the way I'm feeling... I have been dreading it, but it's all different now, isn't it? One can't be happy, but there is something incredible about it, isn't there? A sense of closure. It's all come full circle.*

Cassie frowned.

*Can't wait to see you in Dec. Please give me dates when you can,* the email finished. Mia never signed anything. At varsity, she had never even signed her paintings.

What was she talking about, she had been dreading tonight? Cassie was unsure for a moment whether she had gone mad, whether THIS was the night. As if she could make a mistake about it; about either night. The 19<sup>th</sup> and the 30<sup>th</sup>.

Cassie had already decided what she was going to do on both nights: absolutely nothing.

Not only absolutely nothing to commemorate it, but absolutely nothing at all. No potential displacement activities, and no pomp and ceremony. She would not work. She would not listen to Art Tatum or Oscar Peterson or Bach. She would not read. She would not look at photos of him. She would not visit his grave. She would neither avoid emotion nor seek it out. She was going to stay at home and do absolutely nothing. Maybe go for a walk. A long walk, in Newlands forest.

No, that would be too much like doing something.

A short walk then, around the block, nice and brisk.

But that was on the 19<sup>th</sup>, and the 30<sup>st</sup>. Tonight was the 8<sup>th</sup>.

Cassie opened her last email.

*Dearest Cassie*

Oh, yes, it was definitely from Dianne.

*I've left a couple of messages with your mother, but I thought I'd email too in case they didn't make it to you. We are leaving for SA on the 26th of Nov and will be up in Jonkershoek until Boxing Day. I hope you'll come and see us. We've missed you.*

*Love,*

*Dianne and family*

Dianne and family were coming to town. They had missed her.

They were flying in the middle of the eleven day death. One might as well travel as stay in one place.

The IM sounded its manic bleep, causing her to jump in her chair and utter a bovine exclamation she was glad no-one had heard. Mia was online. Cassie said hello.

Absinthe says:

Hey Cass!

Supernova says:

Hey Mia-Moo. You're back so soon?

Absinthe says:

I was appearing offline.

Supernova says:

So was I.

Absinthe says:

Am I disturbing you? Are you working?

Supernova says:

I was pretending to. I'm going to bed soon though.

She would have done so already if she had thought it likely that she would manage to sleep.

- *My mother tells me the Loudons are coming to town, Mia wrote.*

- *Indeed, replied Cassie. News travels fast.*

- *In Stellenbosch, it does. Are you going to see them?*

She would have to. Yes, she wrote. *Probably.* Even the thought of climbing the long gravel road into Jonkershoek filled her with trepidation. She had not yet imagined entering the house. She had not yet tried to picture their faces. *How's work going?* she wrote.

- *Not bad, came Mia's response. There's this new client of mine who's kind of interesting.*

- *Interesting in what way?*

- *Well I have no idea. I've hardly exchanged two words with him.*

- *So what on Earth could lead you to conclude that he's interesting?*

- *He has an interesting smile, and interesting shoulders.*

- *Aha, THAT kind of interesting. About time, Cassie thought.*

- *I just like the way he breathes.*

- *The way he breathes? Good Lord, Mia, you really are clutching at straws. What's his name?*

- *Milton Featherstonehaugh.*

- *Are you serious?*

- *Or possibly Mister Flintstone. I haven't decided yet.*

- *This is, in fact, a real person, and not a figment of your imagination?*

- *Oh, he's real, I just haven't found out his name yet. His initials are MF. I saw it on his briefcase.*

- *Why don't you ask him?*

- *Oh no, I couldn't. How's it going with the shrink?*

- *He thinks we've had a breakthrough.*

- *You disagree?*

- *I don't know. He says my mind is revolting.*

- *I agree with him completely.*

- *Thank you.*

- *When are you arriving in the UK?*

- *December the 6th. I'll go up to Edinburgh on around the 20<sup>th</sup>, unless you get sick of me before that.* Reminded of dates, Cassie wrote: *By the way, what did you mean when you said you've been dreading tonight? I've racked my brains, I can't think of anything that happened on the 8<sup>th</sup> of November last year*

- *Nothing happened on the 8th last year. It happened on the 8<sup>th</sup> this year.*

- *Now I'm really confused.*

There was a long pause, she saw the Absinthe is typing script starting, then stopping, and starting, and finally: *It was on the 19th last year. I don't know why I thought you'd notice. It's a bit stupid I guess. It was the full moon.*

- *Oh. I see,* wrote Cassie.

In Tooting Broadway, Mia paused, her fingers hovering.

- *I had a dream about Sam the other night,* she typed.

- *Really? What did you dream?*

- *He told me to tell you that he's okay, and that everything will be okay for you too.*

- *Mia, don't start this bullshit again, please.*

- *What bullshit?*

- *You're talking about it as if it wasn't just a dream.*

- *And what if I don't think it was just a dream?*

- *You know I don't believe in that kind of thing.*

- *That's why he talks to me instead.*

Cassie ended the exchange as soon as was politely possible.

These erratic homunculi, these little faceless avatars that bear our aliases, popping into being like Jack-in-the-Greens, they are much bolder than we are, she thought. Mia would never have said such a thing to her in person. She knew better by now. But "Absinthe" didn't care.

She signed out of the IM. Closed another popup that informed her that SHE was ELIGIBLE to live and work in the United States. Wrote an email to Mash, wrote an email to Dianne Loudon.

*It is, at the last account, powerlessness that makes the modern mind revert to the premodern paradigm; to wilful category mistakes. Frazer has given us a name for this: 'magical thinking.'*

She looked up again at the newsprint picture of Bishop Tutu on the wall of the study, that image, instantly iconic, of the man who had been appointed chairman of the commission, collapsed on the

desk under the weight of the collected grief and anger and suffering of a nation, his arms thrown out before him.

*History has shown that violence begets violence, wrote Cassie. Fanon has suggested that blood demands blood. This is the oldest kind of justice: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. How did we manipulate the math? How did we beat the system? What do we do when the tools we have are not adequate to the task we set ourselves?*

*This placid overhaul that is supposed to take place by incremental degrees, on paper, in our mouths. In language. This is no balancing of the scales.*

*To achieve justice you make recourse to logic, at least in theory. But to engineer a miracle? For that you need magic. For that, we summon the shaman.*

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There were moments when Sam's face would lapse, by degrees, into an expression that was utterly unlike his usual self; distant, lordly, even ruthless, as if he was reliving the glory and tragedy of battlefields long since grown green again, fell and faraway plains on which short swords and pikestaffs had been put to use; heavy cavalry.

She never interrupted him when he bore this mien, never availed herself of that stock phrase of intimates, *what are you thinking about?* She was deeply content to imagine the battlefields, and wait for the moment which always followed, seconds or minutes later, when, drawn by her gaze, he turned this imperial mask on her, and held her pinned there, registering only after a long interval that he should focus his eyes and lapse into his familiar open-hearted smile.

Despite, or perhaps because of, its rarity, it was this expression that Mia thought of most often when she thought of Sam; remembered him, the fact of his life, dissociated from any fixity in time and space. She had wondered, once or twice, whether it was the same for Cassie; if there was one expression, one attitude, that embodied him for her. And if so, how Cassie felt when she called it to mind these days, now that it was all truly over.

The last time they had seen each other, the death of Sam Loudon was still inscribed on everything they said and did together. It was written there in Cassie's shaking hands; in the noose of plummy bruises that Mia wore around her neck. Mia had hoped, when she left, that they would both mend faster if the circuit was broken. It was for the best, she thought, that they part ways for a while.

And for a while, it had seemed that she was right. Up until October, Mia had assumed that things were going well for both of them, or at least better. Cassie's emails were not precisely brimming with zest for life, but she was working hard, and that had to be a good sign. There was only this: she spoke often of the investigation, what the police were doing, or not doing, frequently lamenting that they had not asked enough questions, or the right questions, or of the right people, that they were not even trying.

Mia had attempted, out of loyalty, to echo her frustration. Her own interest in the investigation had rapidly dissipated once she left the country. She did not need reasons, she did not need to see justice served. He had wanted the car. He had thought Mia had the key. He had wanted whatever was in the Buurmans' house. There were thousands like him, the country was riddled with people like him, people who had nothing and saw other people with everything and wanted some of it. Mia had known everything she needed to know, except his name.

Based on the single conversation they had had by phone after the news broke, Mia would have said that Cassie's reaction was comparable. Of course they were shocked, of course they had hoped for a different ending. But it was done with now, and that could only be a good thing. What difference did it make, really, if the police had found him and punished him, or if he was killed by his own gang,

or even if he died peacefully in his sleep? Sam was still gone.

But then there had followed a long period when Mia had not heard from Cassie at all, and received no replies to her emails. Eventually she had phoned, only to hear from Nathalie Harris that Cassie was not doing well at all. That she had, in fact, had some sort of a breakdown.

'I almost get the idea she doesn't want to make any progress,' Mia said to Helena. She was in the kitchen now, leaning against the counter while her sister prepared a chocolate mousse for a dinner party she was throwing the next evening.

Mia liked cooking, in principle, but she liked it even more when someone else was doing it. She watched the dark swirls and the light swirls blending beneath Helena's hands as she beat the eggs into the chocolate with one hand, the other absently levering stray flakes of Albany into her mouth.

'Maybe she doesn't know how,' said Helena.

'It just takes a decision,' said Mia.

'A decision to do what?'

'To let go.' She picked a red apple from the fruit bowl and rubbed it against her sleeve until it was shiny all over.

Helena smiled, a memory returning to her from the day when Mia had demanded the training wheels be taken off her bicycle. Their father running alongside with one hand clutching the seat while Mia yelled *Los my! Los my! Los my!* And he duly let go, and she duly crashed into the kerb and fell and skinned her knee, and lay there outraged on the tarmac bawling *Hoekom het jy my gelos?*

Since she was old enough to open the gate, Mia had driven the family to distraction by leaving the property and toddling off on adventures through the neighbourhood accompanied by Brakenjan, the adored German Shepherd who had been her guardian and companion since she was born. Stellenbosch was safe enough then, and she had the dog to guide her home, but she was so often absorbed in her own chimerical inner world that her parents had worried that she might wander out in front of a car.

'What are you smiling about?' said Mia.

'*Onthou jy vir Brakenjan?*'

'Of course.' She bit into the apple. 'Sies,' she said, grimacing.

'What?'

'Tastes like soggy cardboard.'

'Hm.'

'I think I'll go to the Borough market tomorrow, get some nice fresh stuff.' She had been planning to go to Borough anyway, although she didn't mention that.

She had, in fact, already phoned Dylan, her former manager at the one-hour photo place where she used to work, and told him to expect her the following afternoon. Dear Dylan with the eyeliner and the

Jarvis Cocker hair. Months ago he had offered her the use of his own darkroom should she ever have need of it. Thus far she had been content to go the easy route and get them printed – she had not done much serious photography since arriving in London – but for this task, she had finally decided to take him up on it.

‘Ah! Perfect,’ said Helena. ‘Will you get me a trout?’

‘Hm? Thought you were going to make vegetable moussaka.’

‘I changed my mind,’ said Helena, pouring the chocolate mousse into a glass bowl. She put it in the fridge and sat down at the kitchen table with the empty mixing bowl before her.

‘You’re serving chocolate after fish?’

‘Yes.’

‘Won’t they clash?’

Helena frowned. ‘Ag, who cares,’ she said, tersely enough to reveal that she had been concerned about it herself. She began eating the leftover mousse mixture.

Mia tossed the floury apple into the bin and picked up a spoon.

‘Tell her to come and stay with us,’ Helena yawned, and Mia was with her immediately. Their conversations often ran this way, figure-eighting away and across and turning on a word as their thoughts caromed off each other.

‘She is coming to stay with us.’

‘I mean, for longer. Tell her to come and set up shop here.’

‘She won’t listen to me. She thinks everyone’s trying to manipulate her.’

‘Well that’s just nonsense.’

‘I know that.’

‘She needs to get out of there. Then, if she still has something to prove, she’ll find out sooner or later that there’s no-one around to prove it to.’

‘Maybe.’ said Mia.

Helena retired for the evening not long after. Mia took her seat at the kitchen table for the warmth she knew her sister’s rump would have left behind, and began making patterns in the mixing bowl, scrying with chocolate.

*A hemispherical vessel, wider than it is deep,* she thought. It would do no good for Mia herself to suggest it.

If Cassie could hear it from someone who she respected, but who she nevertheless saw as non-partisan, she might at least be persuaded to think about it.

Mia made herself a mug of Horlicks to take up to bed with her, then checked the locks and put off the lights. Before retiring, she sat back down at the computer in the living-room and composed an email to her mother. Then she turned in. Fillette would want her at headquarters bright and early the next morning.

Cassie in London, in their home, she thought, rereading the email in her mind as she fell asleep. It would be fine.

The email probably wouldn't make any difference anyway. Cassie wanted to be miserable, and she was good at being miserable in South Africa. She would probably stay.

Except that she was coming anyway, in a few days.

It would be fine.

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'I once did,' said Melanie.

'What?' said Mia. 'Someone from a corporate contract?'

'No, no, one of my regulars back at the Studio. Tell Fillette and I'll kill you.'

'You're not telling me you, right there in...'

'Jeeeesus, no! What do you take me for? It was a proper date. He took me out to dinner and all sorts.'

'And? Did he sound the same?'

'Identical.' She laughed. 'Except, obviously, you know, *louder*, towards the end.'

Mia laughed. They were on lunch, but neither of them had brought any, so they smoked and drank coffee on the pavement outside the Starbucks neighbouring the insurance firm where they were plying their trade that day.

They had been talking about the noises their clients made while being massaged, and whether one could form an accurate idea of what kind of lover someone would make from their grunts or sighs or murmurs, their cautious silence, or whether or not they chose to direct one's hands. A little lower. A little to the left. Stay there. Harder. Do that other thing again, with the heels of your hands... oh, done, are you? Well then. Splendid.

'Oh, *done*, are you?' echoed Melanie, hunching forward under the weight of her laughter.

Mia didn't know her very well, but she had seen her sloping from room to scented room in the background when the freelancers rendezvoused at headquarters, and had always envied her her long-boned, athletic conformation. A self-possessed girl of West Indian extraction, she was one of Fillette's in-house massage therapists, but like many of the staffers, she still took grease-monkey work for extra cash, or, as now, to help Fillette when she was short-handed.

They began walking back across the glittery plaza towards a Canary Wharf skyscraper, on the sixth and seventh floors of which they were plying their trade. 'Listen, what are you doing after?' said Melanie. 'A couple of the girls are going for a drink.'

'Oh, thanks,' said Mia. 'I have to be somewhere this afternoon.' Her hand fumbled reflexively at her

jacket lining, feeling for the spool of film in her pocket, just to make sure that it was still there.

Back inside the offices of the insurance firm that had hired them, the massage therapists dispersed to their various posts.

The Friday massages were intended as an end-of-year productivity-boosting treat for the employees. Mia and five others had been drafted to come in once a week for the month of November, and Mia had landed the accounts department, where typically of accounts departments, morale was low.

To Mia's eye, even the loops of premature tinsel that had been strung across the lintels seemed to cringe miserably beneath the fluorescent lights. The fake mistletoe looked scared.

On the first Friday, she had set up her massage chair at the end of the centre aisle, and not had many takers. The next week she moved it to an innocuous corner, and gradually the number-crunchers had grown bolder, as first one, then another, stepped up to investigate the stranger and her strange offerings, and their fellows witnessed them returning to their cubicles fragrant and unscathed.

The first of the post-lunch crowd was approaching her now at a swift waddle, nodding a large ruddy face and straightening his tie.

'Hello, hello. Roland Pritchard, how d'you do,' he said, smiling.

'Mia,' said Mia. She smiled. They didn't often introduce themselves. Some offered a few sentences of small-talk, the men especially, and it was not always innocent. She stopped wearing tight-fitting tops after the first couple of weeks. It was after all a process for which most of their clients had not yet identified the appropriate script to follow; the ringing phones and clacking keyboards incongruous with the intimate liaison of skin and muscle and the sudden profusion of heady, earthy scents.

It was all too fleshly, all too human for some of them, and these preferred to keep their distance. They would climb bemused into the massage chair with the air of hospital patients. After fifteen minutes there would be a polite thank you, and they would trot solemnly back to their desks.

'Lovely,' said Roland Pritchard, looking guardedly at the enigmatic collection of small dark bottles that were emerging from Mia's carry-case. 'Got your bag of tricks, eh? So how do we go about this, then?'

Ah, thought Mia. We got ourselves a noisy one. 'Well, if you'll just loosen your collar, and come and sit in this chair, I'll get started,' she said.

'Righto. What fun.'

'Ah, no,' said Mia. 'The other way. With your face on this ring.'

'Oh.' He turned over ungracefully.

He was a lumpy, thick-set sort, and she found it hard to get a decent grip for kneading. She decided to start with his scalp, as pink and bare as a hatchling's, and applied a dab of diluted essential oil to the crown.

'What're you putting on me? Eau de Toilette?' said Roland Pritchard, his voice emanating from underneath the face-rest.

'Ylang-ylang. It's good for stress.'

'I'm going to go home smelling like I've been up to no good. The wife'll have a turn.'

'I can leave the oils if you prefer.'

'No, you go ahead, love.'

Melanie came in from HR to see if she could scrounge some carrier oil.

'How you doing in there?' asked Mia, watching as she decanted.

'Fwwaaaugh,' said Melanie. 'Never-bloody-ending, innit?' Mia was not surprised that there had been a lot of interest in her services. From what Mia had seen on her last walk through the room, HR was mostly male.

Roland Pritchard's eyes followed Melanie's generous rear as she undulated back through the doorway. He was sweating like a salted aubergine. Mia selected some cypress next, partly for its more masculine scent, and partly for its capacity to reduce excessive perspiration. Setting to work on a neck worthy of a pachyderm, she allowed her thoughts to drift, her hands carrying on of their own accord, like a veteran carriage-team whose driver has fallen asleep at the reins.

A year ago to the day, she thought, and glanced at the wall clock. Three sixteen. Where had she been at three sixteen? At home with Katrina and Gabi, playing gummi in the sprinkler.

No, she thought. It was five sixteen in South Africa now. They were at the dam already by then. Exactly a year ago they had been at the dam. Perhaps, she thought, it was at this very minute a year ago she had taken one of the pictures that now lay coiled in negative in her jacket pocket. Perhaps Sam had been eating his last meal: cheap champagne and summer strawberries.

Jacket pocket, thought Mia, starting internally: she had taken her jacket off to work, left it lying next to the chair.

She bent to retrieve the film canister and put it in her jeans. It wasn't comfortable, but it was safer there.

They were set to finish at four; she had time to do perhaps one more. Milton Featherstonehaugh, she suspected, was at this moment trying to convince himself to get up, while there was still time. He had stepped up for a turn every single week.

Mia knew he was watching her. She could always tell. He had been looking her way on and off ever since she arrived that morning.

Glancing over her shoulder towards his position two cubicles down and one over, across the aisle, she saw the gleam of reflected light off his eyeglasses as he hurriedly turned his attention back to the monitor. Mia smiled.

Quarter to four. Quarter to six in South Africa.

Neither she nor Cassie had been able to tell the police what time it had happened, exactly. It had been well past dark, though. It was very nearly dusk here now. Back home in Stellenbosch, the sun would be entering its most glorious hour.

Milton looked up again. When he found her eyes already on his face, expectantly, his display of sudden fascination for the computer screen before him was such that she was almost moved to summon him outright.

Someone else was getting to his feet, and Mia tried to pretend not to notice when Milton leaped up in haste to get there first.

'Hello,' he said, arriving at her corner with dignity. 'Are you still open?'

'Made up your mind, have you?'

'Um?'

Mia felt bad for saying it. She gave him her warmest professional smile and invited him to take his tie off.

The twin V's of tiny hairs that ran down on either side of his neck prickled up in response to her opening strokes. 'Pilo-erection,' she said.

'What?' said Man Friday, starting.

Mia giggled unprofessionally. 'I mean your hairs are standing up here.' She ruffled them to demonstrate.

'Oh. I see. "Quills upon the fretful porpentine" and all that. Must be the breeze.'

'No need to be embarrassed, it means I'm doing something right. It's the equivalent of a standing ovation.'

She moved on to his neck. Mister Flintstone giggled.

He had lovely hair, as dark and dense as an otter's. When she drew her thumbs down past the axis and atlas, he giggled again.

'Does it tickle?' she said.

'It hurts a bit, actually.'

'So sorry,' she said, and commenced a gentle petrissage on his trapezoids. 'Careful,' he said, giggling again, and drawing his shoulders up.

'Do you always laugh when you're in pain?' said Mia.

'Maybe it's better to just leave off that spot,' said Milton. 'I think I did something funny to it playing squash the other day.'

Mia probed gently at the muscle with her fingertips until she located the trigger point which she suspected to be the root of the pain, and gave it a prod. 'Is that funny?' she said.

'As I said, I think it's better if you just don't -.'

'Is this?'

He winced and drew his breath in. 'Yes, that's very funny,' he said.

'If you'll undo your shirt another notch I can get in there with some Tiger Balm.'

Milton complied, and the scent of wintergreen filled the aisle. Mia rolled the stiff joint and listened to the Lamaze-like breathing it provoked. 'Is it getting better?' she said.

'Ah, still fairly hilarious at the moment,' said Matt.

She went on a few minutes overtime, determined to leave him at least a little the better for his trip to her station. When she finished, he assured her that the stiffness had gone completely.

'I'll see you next week then, I suppose,' he said, putting his tie on.

'Actually, no. This was the last. We're done.'

Fillette had made a cameo appearance earlier that morning to settle the account. Mia had been upstairs in Management at the time, and was thus present to witness the modest hubbub that had rippled from one end of the room to the other when she entered. Heads had craned round or over cubicle walls to ogle, and from where Mia stood behind her client, the effect was like a warren of subterranean animals - rabbits, or very out-of-shape meerkats - responding to an alarm call.

It wasn't really necessary for her to come in person, but the business rode on her name, Fillette had explained, and, as her name rode on her face, it was appropriate to present the latter for inspection at least once during the course of a contract.

'Oh! Pity,' said Milton. 'Well, thanks again then.' He buttoned his top button. After a moment's pause he offered her his hand. Mia wiped the excess oil off her own hand and shook with him. He seemed about to say something more, but then thought better of it. Mia shrugged mentally, and hoisted her carry-case. If it was not meant to be, it would not be. Right now, she had other things to attend to.

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In the eighth year of his life Matthew Fletcher had developed a sudden, intense, and short-lived phobia of cockroaches that was to have a lasting effect on his hearing. The fear was born in a minibus headed to a school camp in the Welsh mountains, aboard which Matthew Fletcher's friend Smith had told him a story about a Scouts trip his brother had taken in the same area, during which a cockroach had crawled into his ear. The brother had been discovered unconscious in his tent and had to be driven eighty miles to the nearest hospital. 'Cockroaches don't know how to go backwards, do they,' said Smith. 'So it just kept going.'

The idea of a creature that did not know how to go backwards so horrified Matthew Fletcher that he had slept with wadded Wrigley's stuffed deep into his ear canals for the next four nights, which was the length of the camp, and also the length of time it took for him to develop the beginnings of a serious ear infection which would leave him forever slightly deaf in the right ear, and with a lifelong phobia, not of cockroaches, but of chewing gum.

'I can spit it out if you like,' said Mia, laughing.

'That's not what I meant.'

She did spit it out though. It didn't go very well with the cider.



He looked different by natural light: taller, and more at ease with himself. Or perhaps it was just the greatcoat. She had not noticed until now the liquid quality of his eyes.

'May I carry your fish for you?' he asked as they left the cider stand. Mia had collected a bag of apples and a winter melon, and now with the cider occupying one hand, she was a bit overloaded.

'Thank you,' she said, grinning quizzically as she manoeuvred Helena's fish out from under her arm and into his hands.

'Did I say something funny?' asked Matthew.

'No. I'm just touched,' said Mia. 'No-one's ever offered to carry my fish for me before.'

He laughed a small coughing laugh.

'So what's yours then?' said Mia.

'A dorado. Yours?'

'A salmon trout.'

'Good choice.'

'It was my sister's. The choice, not the trout. That is, she asked for a trout, but they had run out. Is a salmon trout a type of trout or a type of salmon?'

'It's a type of trout.'

'Good.' Mia blew a strand of hair out of her mouth.

They had also run out of plastic bags at the fishmonger's, which was why she had been holding the fish under her arm. Matthew's, she saw, was in a plastic bag. He must have got the last one.

He had recognised her at the fruit and vegetable stand, and waited for her to stop examining artichokes before tapping her on the elbow and saying, hello again.

'Milton!' she had exclaimed.

'I'm sorry?'

'Nothing. What are you doing here?'

He seemed to consider the matter. 'I'm buying some vegetables,' he said. 'And fish,' he added upon further thought. After several false starts, he had succeeded in inviting her to join him in a cup of organic apple cider.

They stood blowing into the liquid to cool it and to accept its heat onto their faces. She watched him bring the Styrofoam cup to his lips, imagining, for the sake of it, the curve of his spine under his coat, the small hard shelf of vertebra at the base of his neck where he tended to slouch, the dent where his laterals knit into the shoulder blade. A film of steam settled on his glasses and he removed them with a small frown. Mia smiled. 'Does your neck feel better?' she said.

'Much. Thank you.' She watched as he rolled his head from side to side to demonstrate how much better his neck felt. 'Something funny?' he said, smiling at her smile.

His vowels sounded as if they were doubled over at the waist. She had noticed before that there was a pleasantly chunky undertone to his accent, which she guessed might have its origins in the

North. To her ear it seemed more pronounced now that he was out of doors, but she wouldn't have sworn to it. They had not spoken much, after all.

'I'm so used to seeing you from the back,' she said. 'It's odd to be face to face.'

'I could turn around if you like.'

'Oh no, it's better not to mix business and pleasure.'

He cleared his throat, and opened his mouth to respond, but just then a shopper bumped his elbow and she winced with him as the cider sloshed onto his hand.

'Shall we take our drinks a bit further, out of the crowd?' said Mia. He agreed, and they walked out of the market into the grounds of Southwark Cathedral.

'So you're from South Africa, I take it?' said Matthew as they approached a bench.

'That's right,' said Mia.

'Afrikaans?'

'Full marks. I'm impressed. Have you been?'

'No, but there's so many of you lot here nowadays, I feel like I have.'

'You should visit.'

They were standing before a bench, but neither sat down, because a sign saying 'wet paint' had been placed next to it. *Lee-ann 4 Devon*, someone else had written with a finger in the wet paint.

'Are you a masseuse back home, too?' said Matthew.

'Massage therapist,' said Mia.

'Forgive me.'

'On and off,' said Mia, smirking. 'But I'm actually an artist. Or an aspiring artist, I should say.'

'Oh!' said Matthew.

'I don't make any money off it yet. The massage thing happened a few months ago. I was working here before, actually.'

'Here? At the food market?'

Mia narrowed her eyes at him archly. 'Near here. Photo lab. Anyway, it was a crap job, and I came across this ad for massage therapists in the paper, so once I'd established by phone that that was not a euphemism, I went for an interview.'

'I'm sure you were a shoo-in.'

'Well I certainly sang for my supper. Fillette didn't know anything about the institute where I trained. So I offered to give her a demo.'

'And that went well, did it?' said Matt.

'Well, I got the job.'

'Pilo-erection?'

Mia laughed.

As a second year art student at Stellenbosch, she had thought long and hard about the possibilities open to a white girl with a fine arts degree in South Africa, and, in an uncharacteristic display of

pragmatism, she had devised a plan to furnish herself with skills that would pay the bills while still leaving her the time and mental freedom to pursue her passion.

'But *massage*, Mia?' her mother had said. She cited every reservation except for the one Mia was sure lay at the heart of it: *massage* was beneath her breeding. No one on either her mother or her father's side of the family had made a living by manual labour since her great-great-great grandfather Kees de Vos the shipwright had died, and even he had read Homer in his spare time. But Mia stuck to her guns. She took out a student loan, and over six months' worth of weekends, she qualified as an aromatherapist, training in Cape Town under a great mudhut of a woman named Zuzu, who referred to Mia, and all her other students, indiscriminate of age and sex, only as 'baby'.

It had paid off. She was already making three times what she had earned at the Happy Snaps, and if she could swing a permanent position at Fillette Maddox Studio of the Healing Arts, Knightsbridge, ('*Studio*, Mia, darling. Not parlour, not clinic, not salon. *Studio*.' ) she could look forward to real prosperity, at least by the standards of the average two-year visa pilgrim. Fillette's rates were astronomical, and the commissions prodigious. While the corporate clients brought in most of the cash, it was those who frequented the Studio that fed its image, and she paid her minions well to keep them there. Fillette's client list was brief, but impressive (*exclusive*, Mia, darling), composed as it was of the remnants of the network of contacts she had spun during her former career in the fashion industry.

Mia had seen more than one internationally renowned face and body emerging out of the studio rooms on a wave of frangipani and Enya only to screech 'Fillette, daaahling! You're here! and envelope her employer in air-kisses. Money couldn't buy the kind of advertising the business received when these beings were seen to float over the threshold in either direction.

'What kind of art do you, ah, do?' asked Matthew.

'Painting, photography. Also sculpture, when I can fund it.'

'My word. What multitalented hands. You should have them insured.'

'Maybe when I'm rich and famous. I can barely pay the rent as it is. But I must confess, I do think about it... what I would do if something happened to them, I mean.' She looked down at the hand that was not holding a cup; her long fingers with their slightly bulbous tips and wide, flat finger-pads.

*Akkedisvingers*, her mother called them.

'Well, you know who to call when you get round to it,' said Matthew Fletcher.

Good, thought Mia. At least he's *thinking* about telephones. Their cups were empty. She lit a cigarette to give him more time.

He was watching her smoke with the same inexplicable intensity with which he had watched her chew gum. 'Want one?' she said. He didn't look the type.

'No, thank you.'

'Don't tell me you once tried to stuff a cigarette in your ear too.'

'No, it's just - what did you do with your chewing gum?'

'Swallowed it.'

'You *swallowed* it?'

'Yes.' She paused. 'Is that not the done thing here?'

'I'm not sure.' They had come to a halt at the entrance to the cathedral. 'Do you feel like going inside?' he said, nodding his head towards the foyer.

Mia waggled the cigarette to show she would not be allowed. It was getting late, anyway. Dylan would be waiting. Not to mention Helena. 'I have to go soon.' *Hurry up*, she thought.

'I'd better get going too,' said Matthew. 'I'm going to make dinner for my god-daughter's parents. They tend to pass out soon after dark.'

'You have a god-daughter?' said Mia. That had to be a good sign. Any idiot could become a father, but to become a god-father you had to have earned the respect and trust of at least two people.

'She's also my niece.'

'What's her name?'

'Maud is her name.'

'Hmm.' said Mia. 'Does she call you Uncle Matthew?'

'At the moment she mostly calls me *thphth-thtth*,' said Matthew. 'Which is what she calls everyone, inanimate objects included. She's only eleven months.'

'I've never met baby called Maud before.'

'I don't think many people have. It was sort of an obligatory grandmother-honouring thing. Her parents call her Mo.'

'You're making dinner for them at their own house?'

He smiled. It was a good smile which collapsed his eyelids. 'I thought it would be nice. Give them a break.'

Mia's phone beeped from somewhere in the recesses of her carry-bag. She put down the fruit. 'Just a moment, sorry,' she said, hauling out her phone to read the text message. *IF URE STILL THERE BUY CAPERS ASB. H.* 'My sister wants capers,' said Mia.

'Yes, yes. Don't we all,' said Matthew opaquely. 'Better head back then. It's almost five.'

'Is it really?' She looked at her phone again. 'I have to go,' she said.

'Oh, Right,' said Matthew. 'Well. Thank you; this was nice.'

'It was.' *Come on Milton! You can do it!* She urged him mentally, as if he was the favourite at the Durban July. 'Well, goodbye,' she said, looking pointedly at the fish.

'Oh yes,' he said, and handed over her trout. A pause ensued. Matthew smiled. There was a sense of expectancy in his face, but Mia had the impression that the expectation was directed inward, at himself. *Mil-TON! Mil-TON!* chanted her inner punters. Her hands were getting very cold.

'You know,' said Matthew Fletcher. 'Caper selection is a tricky business. Two heads might be better than one.'

And the crowd goes wild, thought Mia.

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'They're good,' said Dylan, nodding. 'Especially that one you just did. Perfect thirds. Where's that taken, South Africa?' He was behind her. He had taken out his lip piercing since she last saw him. There was a scar there now, still red, which he fiddled with as much as he had once fiddled with the stud that had made it.

Mia did not look at him. She stood motionless in the bloody light of the dark-room, staring at the images that had just emerged from the wash and which now hung pegged to the line above the chemical trays. Why had she wasted precious film on the view, on the foal?

'Mia?' said Dylan. 'All right?'

'Yes.'

For months after the police returned her camera to her, she could not bring herself to develop this roll. There he was, Sam, frowning happily in greyscale, scant hours before his death. Even as her vision blurred, the aesthete in her was concurring with Dylan's judgement. She had captured him exactly.

'Who are they?' said Dylan.

'My friends.'

He was standing very close behind her, looking over her shoulder. She could smell the Mr. Coffee on his breath. 'So I have to close up now.'

'Okay.'

He hooked a finger through the belt loop on her jeans. 'You coming back to mine?' he said.

'I have to get this fish into a fridge.'

'I have a fridge.'

She hoped Helena hadn't planned on marinating. 'I can't stay the night.'

'Fine by me.'

It was the nineteenth of November.

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'Well, it's almost a year,' said Nathalie Harris. 'In fact, it is a year. And with everything else that 's happened, I had hoped she would be approaching some sort of closure by now.'

*Closure*, thought Cassie, listening from upstairs. Originally birthed into the corpus of discourse on psychotherapy by the Gestalt school, to describe the way in which scattered thoughts resolve themselves into coherent mental patterns.

Birthed into the corpus of mainstream psychobabble by Oprah, Chopra, *Touched by an Angel*.

'She was just sitting on the couch, staring into space...'

It was probably Tish, her mother's older sister.

'Well, she said she was doing absolutely nothing.'

'...No, she doesn't do that *all* the time, she is working, but the point is, that was the day that it, that he was shot... Well, yes. I suppose. I just thought it was strange. She didn't cry or anything. Is that not strange?

...And she has nightmares, sometimes they wake me up, but she says she doesn't remember them.'

Shows how much *you* know, thought Cassie. She had had one only last night of which she remembered almost everything. She supposed she should write it down while it was still clear in her head.

Cassie was not sure what she thought about dream analysis. It had the flavour of carnivalia to her, a sideshow exhibit in the history of mental healthcare. But Dr. Patel had advised her to include a record of her dreams in the journal she was supposed to be keeping, if she did remember any.

'Write on paper,' he had said, when she told him she was doing it in softcopy.

'Why?' said Cassie.

'You'll learn more about yourself.'

Paging back through her entries of the last two months, Cassie thought she could understand why he had said this. She could see quite plainly that she had made progress from her handwriting alone. She had to admit that she had been in a much worse state than she had admitted to herself, and that she was getting better.

*A long-limbed metal creature*, she wrote. *A monster*, she jotted, pressing lightly out of uncertainty. And was it not actually a skeleton? Had it been chasing her? That's what they normally did, monsters. They chased you. But this had not quite been a monster, and she was not being chased. It had been a

dinosaur, and it had been talking to her. It was, in fact, giving her a talking-to. *The dinosaur skeleton was berating me for... I had done something stupid, and I felt foolish.*

'No, he's got her on something else now. Well- something. Welbutrin.' Cassie frowned to herself. She didn't think that was any of her aunt's business. Unless it wasn't her aunt.

'I don't know how many milligrams. I'll have to ask.'

Definitely not her aunt. Cassie closed the journal.

'Well, yes, I suppose I can give you his number. But – don't go and – '

With a mixture of guilt, anger and nostalgia, Cassie crept halfway down the staircase to hear better. She sat on a step with her slippered feet on the first landing, gazing at the familiar view of the Magritte print on the opposite wall, the image dissected at intervals by the wooden bars of the balustrade in a way that would surely have pleased him.

'No, I don't think she needs a change of scene... I think she needs to concentrate on her work. She doesn't need any more upheavals now.'

It was something she hadn't thought about in years, this childhood ritual of hunching against the wall in her pyjamas, listening to them argue. Or rather, listening to her mother argue. Only Nathalie's precise voice could deliver words that were audible across the space between the living room and the stairwell. Big words, the kind that were necessary to deal with the battery of complicated concepts that these conversations involved. *Wa wa wa wa inCESSantly, wa wa wa CIRcumstances*. Her father's voice reached her ears as a low, unintelligible rumble, and later even that had been replaced with silence, when his side of the arguments occurred at the other end of a telephone line, as was the case now.

'What makes you think she'd do any better in a strange country than she would in her own home with people that love her?...

No, of course I know you love her too... Of course I want what's best for her! She just needs to focus her energies on something else...'

I'm not a child anymore, thought Cassie, and descended to the living-room.

'For goodness' sake, Alexander, he was just a boyfriend, it's not as if they were *married*. Who knows, what with his people in the States and all, they'd probably have split up by now if he hadn't...'

She stopped then, because, turning around, she noticed her daughter standing at the entrance to the living room, and then Cassie was witness to a rare phenomenon: her mother caught with her foot in her mouth.

'I didn't mean...' said Nathalie. 'I know he was very special to you...'

Cassie put out her hand, palm upwards. 'Please give me the phone.'

Her mother handed over the receiver. 'Hi, Dad.'

'Cassie.'

'I'd really prefer it if both of you would discuss my psychological health with me directly.'

'Cassie, Mom and I were just concerned.'

This was ominous. He hadn't referred to her mother as 'Mom' in over a decade.

'I'm fine, Dad, I promise.'

Since the day, in fact, when the two of them had sat her down in the living room, and he'd said 'Mom and I have something we need to talk to you about.' Both her parents were in tears within thirty seconds of that ten-ton statement. (Cassie hadn't cried. Neither the blue eye nor the brown had betrayed so much as a dewy shimmer. Her faithful lieutenants, unfaltering to the end.) Since then it had always been 'your mother,' and, increasingly, since she had come of age, 'Nathalie.' That he had reverted to 'Mom' meant they intended to present a united front, at least to her face. She wondered how many previous conversations of this nature had taken place.

'Apparently you don't leave the house except to go to classes, is that true?'

'I do leave the house.'

'Cassie... it's been a year now.'

'A year of what?'

'Since your fellow - since Sam - passed away.'

Or 354 days, depending on how you looked at it. But what was a year when a whole life had been lost, a whole future snuffed out? Although she couldn't deny that her mother was right about one thing: it wasn't as if they had been *married*.

'Are you sleeping any better?'

'A little better.'

'Making friends at UCT?'

'Oh, yes.'

'And how's it going with Dr. Patel?'

'All right. I'm not really sure yet.' Then she remembered that her father was covering the costs of the therapy, and added, 'He's a good listener.' It was true enough. For an hour a week she had an excuse to invoke Sam's memory non-stop, and he would listen.

The journal had come to serve much the same purpose.

*When I replay it in my head, it's always like the riddle with the lion and the deer and the cabbage. The rowboat captain has to get them all to the other side of the river safely, but he can only take one at a time.*

*If you leave the lion and the deer together on the shore, the deer gets eaten. If you leave the cabbage and the deer together, the cabbage gets eaten.*

Dr. Patel had said it didn't matter what she wrote, so long as she wrote. She had tried, half-heartedly, to write about her thoughts, her hopes, her dreams, but hadn't yet managed to get past her regrets. So she wrote about the deer, the lion, the cabbage.



She could have said to Sam, don't leave Mia alone on the shore. She could have left the water herself at that moment when one of them had to leave.

*Sam and I in the water, Mia on the shore. That was how it was, and it can never be any other way.*

*I always get stuck at the moment you said, we should go back, and I said, not yet.*

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Dr. Patel listened with a cling-wrapped frown, his index fingers touching his lips, as she told him about her dream. He asked her when last she had seen such a thing, a dinosaur skeleton. 'In London, as far as I know,' she replied. 'With my father. The Natural History Museum. It was a long time ago.'

'Mmmm.' He cleared his throat. 'Tell me,' he said, 'when you were a child, was it your father who disciplined you more often, or your mother?'

'Disciplined me?' said Cassie. 'My mother, I suppose.' Her father had been too removed from reality to be unduly concerned if she lost her third school jersey that year or didn't clean up after herself in the kitchen. He would sit in the lounge with a high-ball tucked into his shoe, balanced perfectly on the other knee, and glance at her over his newspaper just long enough to say 'Cassie, listen to your mother.' They met each other for real only in the realm of ideas, heads bowed over maps and diagrams and chessboards to connect for a time in the no-man's-land of the abstract.

'And did they employ corporal punishment?' asked Dr. Patel.

GO-TO-BED! She heard her mother's hissed command, punctuated by slaps about her ankles as she was chased back upstairs from the landing. 'Look, Dr. Patel, what does this have to do with anything? I'm not upset about Sam's death because my parents did or did not spank me when I was naughty.'

'That is not what I am suggesting,' said Dr. Patel.

'Then why must we dwell on this?'

He ignored the question. 'Tell me about your parents divorce. How did you feel about it?'

'As any other child would feel, I imagine. Confused, angry, scared.'

'Your father has emigrated, is that correct?'

'Yes. He lives in Edinburgh. And no, I don't hold it against him.'

'Do you miss him?'

'I've grown used to not having him around.' It sounded so jaded. 'I'm seeing him at Christmas,' she added. There was nothing jaded about Christmas. Well, except everything.

Mmm, said Dr. Patel. *Scratch scratch*. 'Have there been any young men who have shown a romantic interest in you over the past year?'

'One or two.'

'And?'

'And what?'

'And how did you react?'

'I said thanks but no thanks.'

'I mean inwardly. How did it make you feel? Was it just these specific men that didn't appeal to you, or did you reject the notion out of hand?'

She thought she could see where he was going with all this. Daddy was gone, and now Sam was gone. The men in her life were ephemeral, and she subconsciously assumed that this was destined to be the case forever, so she avoided forming any further ties with them. What breathtaking psychiatric legerdemain. *Invulnerable as well as unavailable*. 'The man I loved is dead, Dr. Patel,' she said.

'Cassie, you are still a very young woman. Surely you recognise that at some point you should move on, that it is possible to love more than one person in a lifetime?'

'Well of course it's *possible*.' Move On, she thought. When had this bland low culture power-couple found a home in the lexicon of an accredited scientific field of inquiry? She didn't care if she never saw or heard those two words bumping vowels ever again.

'Do you think that it is possible for you?'

'Not at present.'

'And how do you envision your future?'

'I can't say.'

It wasn't that she meant to be uncooperative. The emotions he wished to draw from her were as inaccessible to her as they were to him. She had yet to discover a vocabulary for grief that was anywhere near adequate to its task. All her life words had been both master and servant to her – allies, at any rate – but this thing did not live where words lived. It was referent beyond the Sign. If she were Mia she might have painted it for him; had she still been able, she would have cried. But even then, what matter, what earthly good? He was dead.

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Depending on how you looked at it, Samuel Loudon's life can be said to have ended on the nineteenth of November, 2004, the night they went to the Coetzenberg dam, even though his heart continued beating and his lungs continued to draw in oxygen and expel carbon dioxide. It could also be said to have ended by degrees during the course of the eleven days that followed, as hope began to erode.

One could even make the argument that it had ended a year ago today, the twenty-third, when Sam had suffered a massive brain haemorrhage. He had stopped breathing for twelve and a half minutes, and his heart had stopped beating for two of those. It was not revealed to the Loudons whether any of this was the result of a mistake on the part of a human being, although Cassie had tried hard to ascertain if this was the case. Dianne Loudon had said there was no point in asking. Sam Loudon Sr. had disagreed with his wife on this point.

Further to the argument of Sam's life having ended on the twenty-third, one might point out that it was in light of the news received this day that Dianne Loudon began saying that Sam would never have wanted to live in this state.

On the twenty-third, Sam's surgeon had discussed with the Loudons the fact that they would need to operate again if they were going to save Sam's life. He had also discussed with them the option of not saving his life.

Yes, there was a good chance that he would survive the second operation, and a possibility that he would come out of the coma at some indeterminable point in the future. The Loudons must understand, however, that Sam would not be the same man, very probably he would not even be able to communicate, and he would have to remain on life support for probably the rest of his life. Which would probably not be long. It was up to the Loudons, of course, the doctor had said.

At ten minutes past three on the twenty-third of November, 2005, Cassie came to a halt in the middle of the greeting card aisle in Clicks. Five feet in front of her stood Felix Baum.

She stood for an unhealthy length of time in indecision, trying to decide whether to draw his attention.

Felix. Our friend Felix. Her pulse was thrumming in her hand so hard that it was making her shopping bag rustle. *There is a sickness in this country*, he had written in *Die Matie*. *It is often fatal. And those that die from it are not the carriers.*

She remembered him and Sam returning from their long hikes in Jonkershoek with sweat-damp hair and radiant faces. Sometimes Ben would go with them, and Cassie herself had joined in once or twice. But she knew they really liked to go alone, and mostly she let them. It was only when they went alone that they would arrive back with that look about them: Felix savage and luminous, and Sam with his panoramic eyes. One could tell that they had *talked*, as men rarely talk at that age, and for hours and days afterwards it would be 'Felix says' and 'Felix thinks' and 'Like I was saying to Felix.'

He was not, after all, that much taller than she, but still larger than life, as she remembered him. She reached out to tap his shoulder, paused, then let her hand drop. He might turn around while she was making up her mind to say hello, and there she would be doing the Heil.

*Those who were with him at the end*, he had said at the funeral. *Those who loved him best.*

'Felix?' said Cassie.

There was a long moment before recognition flickered in his eyes. 'Cassie,' he said. 'Is that really you?' As if she might have every reason to deceive him.

He didn't try to hug her or kiss her cheek. Her courage almost failed her, but at last he smiled.

'God, what a mind-fuck. How are you?'

Cassie laughed a little too loudly. 'What are you doing in Cape Town? Aren't you, what about Oxford?'

'I'm just down for a bit to introduce the fiancée to the folks.'

'You're engaged!'

'Shocking, isn't it?' There was hardly a trace of Stellenbosch left in his accent.

He was Sam Sr.'s godson and nephew, and he and Sam had been good friends since childhood. Although Felix was two years older, he had been in their year at varsity, having gone to the army straight out of high school, at his father's insistence, and hated it, and then studied medicine for a year, also at his father's insistence, and hated that too. Then he had registered for a BA, and to make up for lost time, excelled at it.

Cassie had known Felix before she met Sam, or even Mia. Everyone knew Felix. They were not friends immediately, but they had, one could say, respected each other. He had always come first in English. Cassie had always come first in Philosophy. But that was all Cassie had done, while Felix had also edited, and transformed, the university newspaper, and been on the SRC. People he had never met before would come up to Felix outside the BJ Vorster building or on the *Rooiplein* and compliment him on this editorial in *Die Matie* or that letter he had written to *Die Burger* or the other movement he had lodged on *die Taal Vraag* at the last SRC meeting. It had been no surprise to anyone when he won the Paul Roos Rhodes.

'You should apply,' he said to her now. 'When you're done at UCT.'

'Perhaps I should.' She didn't tell him that she had applied once already, the same year he had. She hadn't told Sam either. There would be no point in worrying him, if she didn't get it. Cassie didn't get it.

Felix Baum did get it, and he had spent the first half of 2004 tutoring and growing a russet beard and fly-fishing in Bushman's River Mouth. He went off to Oxford in September and she did not see or hear of him again until he flew back for the funeral.

And now he was here in Clicks, asking her advice on a birthday card for his fiancée, collecting and discarding several while he spoke as if picking hairs out of a drain.

'Does she like dolphins?' said Cassie, offering one for his consideration.

'Hmm. I'm not sure. She likes seafood.'

The beard was gone, and the hair and clothes were neater – the fiancée had had a hand in that, no doubt – but his eyes still had that touch of St. John the Baptist in them when he turned them on her and said, ‘are you still writing?’

‘Still? Writing?’

‘You wrote well. Or that piece you once showed me was good, at least.’

‘I don’t...’ Had she once written?

‘I remember it distinctly. It was about love.’

It was coming back now. It had been at the Christmas House.

Of the piece itself not a word returned to her, but she remembered his frowning praise thereof, and his questions, and criticisms. The way he had spoken, the way they had spoken, she and Felix, when they fell into conversation, which she now remembered had happened often and easily. ‘Do you still write?’ she said.

‘I try to. I’m co-editing a little literary magazine up there that a friend of mine started. So I’m on the other side, for the most part. Midwifery. But I try.’

Seamlessly he fell to talking about passion, and art, and ambition, and generally being as extravagantly filterless as she remembered Felix being, and she listened, and talked back. By the time his fiancée tapped on the glass outside on the street side of Clicks, Cassie was sad to see him go, and wanted to call out, wait. But she didn’t know how she would follow it up. Later she thought, we’re old friends, I could have asked for his phone number; said ‘let’s catch up sometime, before you go back.’ Why hadn’t she asked for his phone number?

In parting, he had said not goodbye, or keep well, but ‘are you happy?’

And she had said ‘I’m fine.’

There was a pause, during which he looked her intently not quite in the eye.

‘Then he did the oddest thing,’ Cassie said to Dr. Patel.

He had said “hold still,” and reached out, and very gently removed from the skin under her eye a stray eyelash. She knew that was what he had done because the eyelash was resting on the tip of his finger, and he was holding the finger before her face. ‘Make a wish,’ he had said. She blew the eyelash off his finger. He left.

It was, she had thought, very unlike him.

‘What did you wish?’ said Dr. Patel.

‘I, what? I didn’t make a wish,’ said Cassie.

‘I’m not sure I believe you.’

He had never challenged her before. ‘That’s not the point of the story.’

'I think it's supposed to be my job to tell you the point of the story, isn't it?' He was no longer looking at her, but judging from the lowered eyes and the small upward pull at the corners of this mouth, she thought that perhaps she had just been witness to an actual witticism. Ah, the unplumbed depths of Dr. Patel! A darling *and* a sense of humour.

When she had entered his offices that day he had been on the phone, and as she waited outside she had heard him quite clearly refer to someone as 'my darling.' The door was not quite closed. She couldn't tell from his tone whether it was a woman or a child. Or a man, for that matter, who could say. But, there were some wrinkles after all. He had a darling and Felix had a fiancée and she, Cassie, had a thesis.

He paused and gave her grace on the subject of her wish. 'So. Tell me the point.'

The point. The point was, she had walked out of Clicks and back to the Cavendish parking lot with a sense of vertigo, her ears ringing. 'The point is, it was good to know there was some reason for us having been friends.'

'Other than Sam, you mean.'

It was the first time he had used Sam's name.

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Sam and she were going to go to London. That was what they had decided, finally, after all the weighty discussions, the arguments, the tears (hers), the long silences (his), and the endless, tireless reiteration of their dedication to each other. Their No Matter What. No Matter What had taken the place of the traditional three-word combo as the most important and oft-repeated verbal affirmation of their dedication to one another. They would stay together, even if they had to stay together in separate countries, although in the end it didn't come to that.

The Loudons had begun the prodigious task of preparing to move to a better part of this best of all possible worlds, and meanwhile, Cassie waited for Sam to make up his mind about whether he would join them.

Ben was keen on Colorado, where he had gone snowboarding with a friend when he was fifteen and still longed to return. Sam, of course, was pushing, vainly, for New Orleans, or failing that, New York. But Sam Loudon Sr. knew about droughts and floods, and Dianne knew about wine, and California had plenty of all three, so that was where they went. Sam Sr. had been offered a research position at Berkeley. Ben would study there for free. So, if he wished to, would Sam.

Tell me about your dreams, Dr. Patel had said. Well, she had one once.

In her mind's ear she had already become accustomed to the diphthong that would surely grace the first syllable of her name, imagined herself in the Berkeley college sweater, driving home with the boys on weekends. She applied and was accepted, but did not manage to get funding. And that was the end of that. There was no way she could go. Well, one way.

But her mother was right; it wasn't as if they were married. Not yet.

Stay or go, South Africa or California, me or Disneyland; her mind was hunted by the decision which only Sam could make; the world reduced to this accursed binary with such intensity that it was an act of divine intervention, or divine comedy, when it suddenly became a multiple choice quiz: when London was thrown on the table.

Out of all the days they had spent together in this house, it was the memories of that night – the night they decided to go to London – that stretched most readily to life when Cassie returned to Jonkershoek for the first time in a year. Perhaps because of the silence.

It was a niggling, conspicuous silence, and it took her a moment to place it. The pulse of the house had disappeared. 'Where's the grandfather clock?' she asked Sam Sr.

'Crated and shipped, like most of our other things,' he replied.

Only then did she enter the living-room and take in the radically winnowed furnishings of the house, the naked floor-boards, the walls stretching bald to the ceiling. The white love-seat was still there, she saw, and so was the baby-grand, pushed into a corner and shrouded in a dust-cover. It looked to her as if it had dressed itself up as the ghost of a piano for Hallowe'en and was hiding there in the hope of scaring someone. It was the wheeled feet poking out from underneath the sheet like the bare skinny legs of a child that did it. 'We'll have the rest sent after us,' said Sam Sr., running a hand over the lid of the poplar-wood chest she had always admired. 'Don't know where we're going to put you,' he murmured to it. 'Our house in San Francisco is a bit smaller than this,' he said to Cassie. 'Have a look round before you go; if there's anything you'd particularly like, maybe we'll leave it with you.'

'Really?'

'Better than letting it gather dust in storage. Wouldn't you say, D.?' Dianne Loudon appeared from the kitchen with a coffee-tray.

'What was that?'

'I was saying that Cassie should see if there's any furniture she likes.'

'Oh yes. We can certainly spare some of this bric-a-brac,' said Dianne. As if this was all they had been talking about, their heads turned as one towards the piano. 'You don't have anyone in the family who plays piano, do you? None of us do, it will go to waste over there.'

Sam Sr. looked blankly at his wife for a moment, as if she had said something in a language he did not understand. The piano was Sam's. They had bought it for him when he was ten and just beginning to show signs of the interest that would become the passion of his short life. The White Elephant in the

Room, concealed with about as much success as if it were an actual elephant. Cassie glanced at it again, and read its position in the corner in a different light this time. Naughty piano!

'I don't play,' she said evenly.

It was the second time in the space of a month that she had made the pilgrimage to the Boland. From the outset the visit had the feel of a leave-taking, in part because they were selling the Jonkershoek house she knew so well. In all likelihood she would never set foot in it again. She supposed it was possible she would never see the Loudons again either: it was silly to think they would get in touch every time they came to South Africa. Even so, once she arrived, she did not feel she could stay long. Whatever the real source of the tension between Sam's parents might be, she felt sure her presence was exacerbating it.

And as for Ben Loudon, she could hardly bear to look at him. She had noticed it first after the family's hasty return from San Francisco last November. It had been painful enough to see Sam's pale Viking eyes staring out at her from his father's face, but when Ben got out of the car, every nerve in her body had done a double-take. He had outgrown boyhood during the ten months away, and as he approached to greet her, sporting Sam's gestures, Sam's posture, she had consciously to restrain herself from grasping at him with both hands like one drowning.

Dianne Loudon chatted about the German couple who had bought the place. Such nice people, she said. Nature enthusiasts, very excited about the mountain-bike trails. Cassie sipped her coffee and stared at Ben.

Another year's growth and the surfer's hair he now wore long had muted the similarities in their features, but in bearing the resemblance was all the more striking. The way he sat down. The way he crossed the spaces between things. The way his eyebrows flicked up when he was addressed. That air of alert affability.

'Cassie?' Cassie dragged her attention back to the conversation, hurrying to recoup. Was it her turn to speak?

'I'm sorry?'

'I said, there's something I want to ask you,' said Dianne. Cassie noticed the slightest movement of Sam Sr.'s head, almost a shake, which ended with his gaze aimed through the window. By this light she could see how his hair had greyed at the temples. 'I've decided to go and visit Isaac's family,' Dianne continued.

'Isaac?' said Cassie, mystified. She knew of an Isaac, of course, but what Dianne was suggesting was so far beyond the realm of possibility that her mind refused to make the connection.

'Isaac Butshingi.'

'You want to go and visit Isaac Butshingi's family?' Cassie repeated.

'Yes. And I think it would be wonderful if you would come with me.'



Sam Sr. muttered something under his breath. She heard Dianne's name, but nothing else.  
*Wonderful. Isaac Butshingi. Come with me,* Cassie recycled blankly.

'In Kayamandi?' It was, of course, very far from the point that they lived in Kayamandi, but she had grasped at the first fact that had a readily available noun attached to it.

'Yes, in Kayamandi.'

'Oh,' said Cassie. Sam Sr. still staring through the window. There was a shadow now of that look about him that she remembered from the funeral; that air that he was wearing his soul outside his skin, naked to the elements, like a mollusc without its shell. He said nothing, but she saw the words on his face: no good will come of it. 'Why?'

'To let them know that all is forgiven.'

Cassie frowned politely. Was it? She thought. Had she missed a memo?

'The Butshingis have also lost someone. Don't you see, Cassie? We're connected. I think enough time has passed now that we will all gain from acknowledging that.'

The Butshingis. There was another unthinkable concept. Somewhere out there was a house that contained the family of Isaac Butshingi; people who had, no doubt, mourned his death.

'I've spoken to his mother,' said Dianne. 'On the phone. She said we would be welcome.'

A house that contained his *mother*. A woman who had raised him, nursed him through winter snott-colds, made him sandwiches, until he was old enough to kill and/or be killed. And Dianne wanted to... what? Swap recipes? Talk about how much it sucks when your son gets shot in the head? 'I'm not sure,' said Cassie. Sam Sr.'s head rolled towards her like a boulder from the mouth of a cave. She caught his eye and saw they were of a mind. It spurred her on. 'I'm not sure I can do that,' she said. 'I'm not sure that I want to.'

'Will you think about it?' said Dianne.

No. 'Okay.'

Later, she walked through hollow rooms, as suggested, to see if there was anything she wanted to take with her.

As she crossed the hallway between their room and Sam's, she heard Sam Sr. Dianne talking in the kitchen. The word 'piano,' her name, the word 'How?'; then they stopped talking. They had heard her shoes squeaking on the hardwood. The back door opened and closed again. She would leave as soon as possible.

A year ago, when she had taken Sam's records, Dianne had asked Cassie if she needed a car, if she wanted Sam's BMW. She remembered wondering if the back seat still had bloodstains in it, before she had said no thank you, she had a car. And she remembered Sam Sr.'s face.

Suddenly it could be deflected no longer, the calamitous déjà vu. She had done this before, not once but twice, walked through this house like a bargain-hunter at a garage sale, deciding what she

would ask if she might keep. A year ago, before the Loudon's second departure, and a year before that, before the Loudons' first departure.

They were already living together, she and Sam, in the Slave Quarters, when the Loudons began their preparations.

His parents, Sam had often remarked, were 'total hippies' in their own distant youth, and held neither illusions nor reservations about their cohabitation. It was, in fact, Sam Sr. who suggested the two of them move into the Jonkershoek house.

They were planning to rent in California to begin with, and since Sam had decided to stay behind until he graduated, it made sense to keep the house. 'It's a buyer's market right now anyway,' Sam Sr. had said to her. 'You kids stay here, and when Sam finishes his degree, and you finish yours, we'll sell this one, and buy one over there, and then you two... well.'

Then you two will either get married or split up, she finished for him silently. Either way, their boy was coming to America. The show of generosity, of having factored in her plans, was typical of him, and truly meant, but she knew its limits.

*Congratulations! You've got 1 FREE YEAR!* She had won him for now, but his family would not relinquish him to her and this country forever.

So they divided linen and crockery and hardware and books. The poplar-wood chest, which for years had been used as a repository for all Sam and Ben's academic records, projects, papers and essays dating back to their nursery school finger-paintings, had been emptied out onto the living room floor.

Sitting cross-legged beside it with Dianne and her two sons, Cassie had watched as the cold war between sentimentalism and practicality commenced, the 'throw away' pile remaining meagre and the 'keep' pile growing ever more unwieldy as Dianne wrestled items from the former to the latter.

'Out,' said Ben, handing a certificate from a judo tournament to Sam.

'Oh, no, not that...' said his mother, attempting ineffectually to snatch it from his grasp. 'I'm not throwing any of your awards out.'

'Mom, it's just a certificate of *participation*, it's not an award. It's basically a reminder that I didn't win anything at all.'

'Oh, would you believe? What are these doing in here? Now, where are Sam's?'

'Mom, that's just... *gross!*' Ben, horrified, was holding by its corner an envelope marked *Benjamin's Front Teeth*.

'Mom,' said Sam tenderly, 'this is going to be a pointless exercise if you don't harden your heart a bit. Tell her, Cassie.'

But Cassie had forgotten her role as arbiter, gleefully falling upon this unguessed-at cache of information about that inconceivable thing: Sam before she met him.

Several papers and trinkets she had put to one side to peruse in turn, a semi-circle of keepsakes, like ritual objects, beside which she sat, cross-legged, her body obscuring those she knew Dianne would claim immediately once they were discovered.

In the shadow of her knee: an envelope containing what felt like a small cardboard box, marked, in Dianne's hand: *Samuel's Front Teeth*.

On the floor in front of her: A photo of Sam, aged two, held in his father's arms. It was here, and not in the photo albums, because Sam had used it for a Std. Two English project entitled *My Biography*.

Currently in her lap: a pair of foolscap pages stapled at the top and entitled *English Composition, Sammy Loudon, Std. 1*. Written in pencil in delightfully large letters, was the following:

*Once upon a time there was a farmer. The farmer had 3 sons and each of them had to go and seek his fortune and bring it back to the farmer because then the farmer would decide which one deserves to get the farm and all the cows when he died. So the 1<sup>st</sup> son became a sailor and explored the whole world and had alot of amazing expearances and had many stories. The 2<sup>nd</sup> son became a milloniare and had 6 Rolls Roys and 3 houses, 1 in France and 1 in America and 1 in Jay Bay and also a privat jet. The 3<sup>rd</sup> son stayed right there on the farm with his dad and lernt all about farming and also he met a lady and got married and they got a hamster and a staffie puppy. So 13.5 years later the farmer was old and he called all his sons to the house to tell them which 1 he had chosen to get the farm. So they all came but then a freak serviette nuke landed on the house and exploded and they all died the End*

This barbarous child was a stranger to her. And yet she recognised flashes of his adult self in those words; a recognition from which she drew a keen and rarefied joy. She laughed more loudly than the story warranted.

'Oh gosh yes,' said Dianne, glancing at the papers Cassie held. 'The serviette nuke. That one's a classic.' She set her eyes to rest on her eldest son's face. That knowing look. Cassie knew she was remembering him as he was then. Darling little blond thing with dirty knees and visions of mushroom clouds dancing in his head. She swallowed her envy. She wanted to wolf him down, Sammy Loudon, Std. 1; to contain him as Dianne did.

Almost from the beginning she had been possessed of a sense of haste to get to the point where his life with her outweighed his life without her, in significance if not in time-span. And until then, she wanted every detail of his past, so she could come as close as possible to having lived it with him – in his mind, rather than her own. He answered whatever questions she asked, but she wanted things she could not ask for. She wanted to graft his existence onto hers in its entirety.

He, by contrast, had asked little of her, and little about her. He would listen with attention and interest if she offered him something, crucial or inane, from years gone by, but seemed not to require it the way she did. The past is in the past, he said. You don't need it to know someone.

Oh, such simple, lovely things he believed in. The past is in the past. All experience is good experience. There are no coincidences. People should be judged by their best actions, not their worst.

So you think you know me? She had challenged him. It was meant lightly, but only just.

Do you think I know you? He lobbed back. Lightly.

If you don't know me, then no one does.

Then perhaps no one does.

You know me.

She was alone now in the living-room. Through the French doors that opened onto the garden she could see Sam's parents, cut into squares, gridlocked. Sam Sr. was gesturing. Dianne had gardening gloves on, and a pair of pruning shears in one hand, but was not doing much gardening. Her arms were crossed over her belly.

Cassie arose from where she had been sitting by the poplar-wood chest.

She had left his room - their room - for last, anticipating the skeletal remains: the wrought iron bed-frame, the bare curtain-rail. She would, no doubt, seat herself on the bed-slats, close her eyes and breathe in, and pretend to herself that there was still a hint of him clinging to the air.

To delay the realisation of the image, Cassie lingered a little longer in the living room. Without examining her motives, she approached the piano and tugged at the sheet that covered it. It moved more readily than she had anticipated, the whole thing falling to the floor with a sleek *whump*.

What a fine thing it was, Sam's piano; how solid and lustrous. *Baby grand*. The capriciously oxymoronic epithet might itself have belonged to one of the jazz masters whose life's work had once lined the shelves in his room. Fats Waller. Duke Ellington. Jelly Roll Morton. Baby Grand. And the voice he had drawn from it! He had told her, confidentially, that a baby grand was generally considered inferior to the humble upright in sound quality, lacking space in its squat length for decent bass strings. 'But this one's okay,' he hastened to append. 'She's five-six, just big enough to hold her own, and it's a good make.' Whatever it might have lacked in the configuration of its innards, he had made up for with skill.

Her reflection and the ellipses of the overhead light glimmered fathoms below; someone had polished the piano in the not too distant past. She opened the fall, still smooth on its hinges, and brushed her hand over the green felt mat that lay over the keyboard. Lifted it, began rolling it into a tight spool, slowly, watching her hands at their errand as if curious to discover their aim. She laid the mat on the piano stool, and stroked the keys. Pushed down on middle C, so gently that the hammer barely made contact with the string. The piano responded with a ghost of its voice. Sleep-talk. She depressed the G above middle C. That was a perfect fifth. The noblest interval, according to Sam, although if she asked him to explain why, he would just say 'listen' and play it again.

The keys, she knew, were genuine ivory. She wondered, farcically, how the piano felt about that, whether it considered itself graced with the rightful finery of a bygone age, or cursed to be a relic of a barbarous tradition, like the last victims of Chinese foot-binding.

What would its fate be? It would outlast them all, certainly.

A false memory flipped up behind her eyes like a Viewmaster slide: she seated nymphlike on the piano's dark back, Sam rising from his place at the keyboard and coming to her swift and predatory to unzip her from a sequinned dress she had never owned or even seen.

She had imagined it often enough, especially in the early days, but it had never actually happened, *would* never have happened, was not like him at all, the Piano Fantasy. For a moment she had been fooled.

Cassie stepped back. The piano with its grimacing mouthful of white teeth made her think of a beached orca.

The handle on the back door squealed, and quickly she closed that dark maw and rearranged the dust sheet. She exited the living-room and went down the passage to the last room.

There they were, curtain-rail and bed-frame, and she seated herself and breathed. She didn't need to pretend about the hint of him clinging to the air, though.

It was not, of course, his scent, but there was the scent of the star jasmine that flowered on the trellis outside his window, and that was, as good as any, the smell of *them*. Of Sam and Cassie. The voice of the baby grand was *him*, Oscar Peterson was *him*, but the jasmine was *them*, and especially *that year*.

Cassie had read that smells can access the emotional component of memories more intensely than any other sensory stimulus, processed as they are right next to the amygdala, that great trading floor of emotion and memory. It was true. Other memories were compartmentalised; framed for the sake of order by a beginning and an end, however arbitrary. But the response that this smell drew from her was boundless, timeless, yet at the same time it seemed to converge on a single, piercing point: a bedlam of feeling too complex to be attached to any single experience. And impossible, for that reason, to relate, or record. The knowledge that she might one day forget it, this precise chaos, struck her with foreboding. She turned her head towards the open window and tried to fill herself with the sweet white scent so that it might incorporate itself into her being.

When she opened her eyes again, she noticed that there was something else in the room after all. A stretched canvas, about the size of a serving tray, leaning against the wall with its back facing outward. She didn't have to look to know what it was, but she picked it up anyway, and sat down again on the bed-frame with the painting on her knees.

The face depicted there, with the painstaking attention to detail of an artist who had yet to find her own lens for the world, was solemn, pale of cheek, earnest of brow, odd-eyed, just plain odd: the face Cassie lugged around with her every day. Possibly a little more symmetrical, but like all Mia's work, disquietingly like. Nowhere was there brushwork evident, nowhere an unclear edge – Cassie had watched Mia smooth away the evidence with her ring fingers. The background in shadow, suggestions of a cupboard and a bare wooden floor. It was unsigned.

Cassie wondered if the Loudons had left the portrait in this prominent spot on purpose, so that when they sent her hunting for trophies she would be sure to spear it first.

Of course they didn't want it. Who could blame them? A painting of a girl who meant really nothing to them now that Sam was gone, by a girl who meant even less. A pair of Sam's girls, artist and model, best pal and sweetheart, who meant really nothing much now, except that together they would always be the reason their firstborn son was dead.

*Those who loved him best.*

Cassie knew it should mean something to her. There could be no other object that more neatly contained all three of them: Mia had entered her life at its inception and Sam upon its completion. It was a good story, a grand story, even. A baby grand story. She had once cherished a sepia-toned daydream of telling it to their children. (Ah, that painting? Your father and I met because of that painting.)

But she had never really liked it. It made her feel narcissistic, or voyeuristic, or self-conscious, or something. And it had always bothered her that her eyes were swapped around – blue on the left and brown on the right. She didn't like the possibility that this painting came closer to showing her the way she really was than a mirror did.

After she moved in with him, she insisted it be banished from this room. It gave her the creeps to be caught in the cross-hairs of her own gaze when she was trying to sleep.

'Why would your eyes be open when you're trying to sleep?' Sam had wanted to know.

Okay, she admitted, so it wasn't when she was trying to sleep that it bothered her, it was when they were fooling around, okay, Captain Logic, congratulations, and screw you for making me say it. How am I supposed to lose myself in the throes of passion when I'm staring me right in the eyeballs?

Sam said he guessed that meant his plans for a ceiling mirror were out.

The portrait spent the next week or two on the wall of the living-room, until Sam complained that he couldn't practice with her looking over his shoulder, had never been able to concentrate with someone watching him, least of all her. He had never really liked it either, she supposed.

As Cassie refused to have it in the dining room or anywhere else where guests would encounter it, it was eventually left to lean against the wall of the vacant master bedroom, with plans to find

inoffensive lodgings for it when they went to London, and then, well, a freak Soviet nuke landed on them and they all died, The End, so that was that.

Maybe that was the real reason that neither she nor Sam had liked the painting, she thought. It was a damned face. Maybe that's why Mia had given it to him: she didn't like it either.

*You know me*, she thought, staring into her own star-crossed eyes.

And he so easy to know, this boyman who was like a slip-knot, untying himself at the slightest tug and paid out to her in clean, supple lengths. She, by comparison, was a granny knot. Or a noose, rather. She could not present herself plainly to the world the way he did; would never venture so far as to say, things are *thus*. The only way to know her was to be the thing that the rope drew tight around. He had understood this, without trying, and willingly he stuck his head through the loop.

She thought again of the two-year old child in the photo on the cover of Sam's *My Biography* project. That child had borne an expression Cassie had never seen on Sam's adult face: an ancient, fearsome wisdom that could only awe the subject of his gaze.

'It used to scare me a little,' Dianne had said when Cassie remarked on it, asking if there was a copy of the photo she could keep. 'You'll see what I mean when you have your first. They are in their way so much older than us, these primal little beings. Then they learn our rules and habits, and it gets lost.'

There was this to envy, too, then: that there were aspects of the child that were not merely aspects of the adult in embryo; pieces that had disappeared forever, hidden or lost or changed, but at any rate, unavailable to her.

A knock at the door. Cassie looked up to see Ben peering into the room. 'You okay over there, Cassie?' he asked, his r's all present and accounted for. She found it disarming how the San Francisco ebbed and flowed in his accent, like the tenor register had ebbed and flowed a few years back when his voice was breaking.

'I'm all right,' she said. 'Come in. I'm just reminiscing.'

Ben came in. He had a manila envelope in one hand. 'I wanted to give you this,' he said, offering it to her.

'What is it?'

'Look.'

She opened the envelope and pulled out four sheets of 10-stave paper. The pages were covered in musical notation, and the top sheet was headed *Nocturne in C*. She recognised Sam's handwriting.

'It was the first real piece he ever wrote,' said Ben.

'But he only composed jazz...' Cassie said unthinkingly, unmanned by the gift.

'That was later,' said Ben. 'He always said you have to climb the ladder before you can knock it down.'

'That's right,' said Cassie. *Or in the case of jazz, shatter it to splinters.*

'I think you should have it.'

'Oh Ben, thank you. Don't your parents...'

'I think you should have it,' he repeated. 'I brought it back for you.'

'I wish I could read it,' said Cassie, gazing down at the neat black notes, pinned like dead insects on the staff. 'Did he ever play it for you?'

'Once.'

'He did? What... what was it like? Do you remember?'

'Well, I was only about thirteen then, and he said it wasn't finished. But I thought it was beautiful.'

*Beeudiful.* The word sounded strained coming from his gruff post-adolescent throat. At his age, only girls were allowed to be beautiful, and then only under special circumstances. He had chosen it for her.

'I don't suppose...' said Cassie. 'I don't suppose you remember how it goes?'

'Goes?'

'The tune. The melody.'

Ben cast his eyes up. For a moment she thought he might be on the point of humming something, but then he shook his head. 'Sorry,' he said. 'It was years ago.'

'That's okay.' She laid a hand quickly on his arm, then tucked the sheets carefully back into their sheath. 'Thank you so much.'

He nodded, toeing a proud nail-head in the floor with his strong, dirty foot. Nature's child; always shoeless if he could possibly help it, thought Cassie. Just like his brother.

'I'm sorry I've been staring at you like a crazy person, Ben,' she said, running her thumbs along the edges of the envelope. 'It's just –'

'I know,' he said quietly. 'My mother does it too, these days.'

'Oh...'

'She tries not to let on, but I know. There's other things. She always used to confuse our names, Sam-ag-I-mean-Ben, and now she never does. She's too careful.'

'I'm sorry.'

'It's not your fault.'

It was, though.

A fine rain had started falling by the time Cassie descended through Jonkershoek back into Stellenbosch proper, the envelope on the passenger seat beside her, the portrait face-down in the back. She had taken it in the end, mostly to save Sam's family the awkwardness of having to decide what to do with it.



The rain trapped the light, giving the vegetation around her gloss and bulk. A recollection of walking through these fields on a day just like this: her feet sinking into tufted molehills, her shins cutting a path through clumps of long silver-beaded grass until the hems of her jeans were heavy with dew and her socks had made two chafing rings around her ankles. Sam pointing, and she looking up towards the mountains to see a double rainbow.

It's good luck, was what Sam said.

You just made that up, was what she said back.

Or had she made up the whole lot?

She had spotted the earlier impostor, the piano memory. Could another such mistake go unnoticed? Easily, easily. If she could invent one memory, she could invent thousands. Perhaps she already had.

What if, for instance, he had never actually approached her, all guileless grey eyes and bluffed gumption, where she sat on the lawn by the *Rooiplein* with a book for company over her picnic lunch, to say, 'You're the girl in Mia's painting, aren't you?'

That much she was fairly certain had happened. Something more trivial, then. What if the book she had been reading was not actually *Gulliver's Travels*?

There was no way to check, no cross-references outside her own mind. It had only been a year so far. After two, or ten, or fifty, she might have an entire second lifetime's worth of specious memories. And she might have forgotten just as much of the truth.

Write it down, she thought as she drove out of the dorp and into the concentric maze of Dalsig. While you're still almost sure of most things.

The sepia-toned story started in the house she was approaching now. Or, one could go further back. The story started in a tut room in the BJ, with a slight girl eyeing her cock-headed and intent as a mantid throughout a non-discussion on the themes of *A Grain of Wheat*. After the class, Mia had approached her, complimented her on her eyes, and asked unceremoniously if she would consider posing for a painting. Cassie had laughed in pleased surprise.

Following a phone call from Mia earlier that week, Cassie had made plans to stop in at Mia's home and visit Inneke de Villiers before going back to Cape Town. 'Since you're heading up to the old stomping ground anyway to see Sam's people, won't you put your head in chez moi and pick up our Christmas presents?' Mia had said. 'If you have space for them in your luggage, that is.' Cassie had said she would.

The gate was propped open with a brick, but Cassie rang the doorbell anyway to let Inneke know that she had arrived. She heard the atonal rattle sound from within the house, and smiled when it was followed as always by two heraldic woofs. At least this much hadn't changed.

She had spent countless hours here during her undergraduate years, when the house was still full to overflowing with Inneke's daughters and their assorted entourages, and the ceiling had rung with the hyena-cackle that the De Villiers women all shared.

Throughout her childhood Cassie had longed for a house full of noise and movement, a troop of siblings to play with, to fight with, to lend layers to her life. After her father moved out there were just the two of them, Nathalie and Cassie, drifting through their too-large house in Rondebosch like a pair of dry leaves and gradually becoming strangers. The first time she had come to Mia's house in first year, she had found herself unutterably covetous of these riches; the prattling, the squabbling, the endless unintelligible family jokes, this patina that lay dusted over the monument that was their communal past. Three sisters. *Three*. It wasn't fair. All Cassie had was a step-brother she seldom saw and barely knew.

She imagined siblings, and perhaps particularly siblings of the same sex, to share a sort of hive-mind; a primordial *einführung* that no friendship, and certainly not the handful of play-play romantic relationships she had had up to that point, could come close to approximating. It was not just DNA that did it, she suspected. It had something to do with growing up between the same walls, bathing in the same bathtub, eating at the same table, making forts out of the same furniture. The fact that Mia was born into a house full of objects already infused with De Villiersness long before she had first encountered them.

They're not all they're cracked up to be, said Mia when Cassie told her she wished she had a sister. You can borrow one of mine any time.

Only Inneke lived here now. Sonya had married and moved to Melbourne in 1999, Helena was in London doing care-work for the elderly. Mia of course was with her, and the youngest, Katrina, was in her first year at U.C.T. As she made her way up the agapanthus-choked path, Cassie was saddened for the second time that day by the thought of a house she had loved now empty of all she had loved about it.

A black-and-white form came tearing plume-tailed over the wet lawn towards her. 'Tosca!' she called as the border collie delivered a volley of high-pitched barks. The dog whined and reared up to scrabble at her clothes with muddy paws. Cassie let her. She did not, in general, approve of demonstrative dogs, but it was good to be remembered.

'*Nee! Los haar!*' said Inneke de Villiers, appearing from around the side of the house. The collie desisted immediately. 'Hello, my dear girl,' said Inneke de Villiers.

'Hello, Prof,' said Cassie, and smiled.

Inneke had taken Cassie for Introduction to Feminist Theory in first year, a course notorious for galvanising otherwise reticent students, too demure to do anything but scribble down every word they heard, into hot-blooded hour-long debates. Cassie had found her at first brilliant and intimidating, later

just brilliant. Even before she met Mia, Cassie had resolved to sign up for every one of Inneke's courses.

Now they sat out on the stoep watching the rain spill over the thatch, talking about the four girls, and especially about Mia, and how well she was doing in London.

'It's a relief to me,' said Inneke. 'To be honest, I wasn't sure at all that she would take to it as well as Helena did. She's always been so impractical.'

'But there's room for impracticality over there,' said Cassie. 'They're used to artists and thinkers and mad creative geniuses. Society has accommodated them for centuries. They're part of the system.'

'That's true,' said Inneke. 'Perhaps it was long overdue. It's hard to grow up in a town like this when you're so obviously a liminal being.'

Mia had been a quiet child, if not quite introverted, then certainly introspective. She generally preferred her own company, or the company of the family pets, to that of other children. She could sit peaceably alone for hours, becoming fully absorbed in some ritual of nature: a cat washing itself from head to tail-tip, or a spider weaving its web from thin air to completion in the join of the awning.

And of course, she drew; laborious studies of the frogs and birds and insects that she found in the garden, and Rabelaisian dreamscapes populated by fanciful hybrid creatures; the traditional centaurs, gryphons and merpeople sharing the page with her own *krokofante* and *volstruisperde* and *jagrenosters*. So creative, said her teachers. But not very good in group activities.

It was when she reached high school that Mia's otherness had begun to be a burden to her. An unusual teenager is a very different proposition to an unusual child, and Mia had borne the strain ill at times. She had been such a sensitive girl.

'I don't know. Stellenbosch University has its fair share of freaks,' said Cassie. 'Or Mia certainly seemed to find enough of them to keep her in boyfriends for four years, at least.'

Inneke laughed. 'I wonder if this new *kêrel* of hers runs true to type,' she said.

'Matt?' said Cassie. 'I wouldn't think so, from what I've heard.' Not a week in, and already she's told her mother, she thought. This revealed more about the fledgling romance than anything Mia had said in the single decorous email Cassie had received on the topic of the conquest of Milton. 'She says he's like an otter.'

'An otter... Well. He can't be too bad then, can he?'

A few minutes of easy talk passed before Inneke asked after the Loudons. Cassie had intended to gloss over her visit, but to her surprise, she found herself telling Inneke everything that had happened that morning. As she converted the passage of those hours into a communicable form, things that had seemed all one – the fleecy feel of the hairs on Ben's arm under her hand, the emptiness of the house, the scent of jasmine, Dianne's announcement – gradually resolved themselves into manageable units she could select, expand on, or dismiss as inessential to the point.

The point, meanwhile, was elbowing its way out from among the other thoughts and feelings the morning had provoked, and settling itself comfortably in the pit of her stomach for perusal at leisure. Thus peculiarised, she recognised it at once: it was by now as familiar to her as the ache of an old injury on a cold morning.

'Of course you feel guilty,' said Inneke. 'It would be strange if you didn't.'

'But consciously, I know it wasn't my fault. People keep telling me it isn't, and I know it isn't, but it doesn't seem to make a difference.'

'Not guilty because he died, Cassie. Guilty because you didn't. Because you still have an entire life to live, and because you want to live it.'

Survivor's guilt, thought Cassie. Post-traumatic stress syndrome. Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance. Closure. *Catharsis*. The discourse of grief seemed inadequate, insulting, even, when applied to her private maelstrom, the loss of *this* man, *this* life. She thought again of Dianne.

'What you need to do is get shot of everything around you that's holding you back,' said Inneke. 'Everything that is no longer useful to you or anyone else.'

*Holding you back*, thought Cassie. If anyone would understand her fundamental problem with the idea of moving on, it was Inneke. 'I don't understand how people do it,' said Cassie. 'Complete this process, like some sort of a syllabus. And Sam's dad, I can see it, he doesn't understand either. It just doesn't make any sense to me. This idea of... *Moving On*. She aspirated the 'o's' with disdain. She had finally figured it out, why the mere words vexed her so much. 'Or *letting go*. Even the phrase *holding me back*.' The problem was not that they were clichés.

'They're *metaphors*,' said Cassie. 'Things you can do physically. A tribe of nomads moves on. A shot-put athlete lets go. Nobody, not once, has yet explained to me what is *meant* by these expressions when it comes to Sam's *death*, how I'm supposed to implement them, practically, in terms of what's happening in my *head*.'

Inneke nodded. 'Okay,' she said. 'I won't try and tell you what to do with your head. I'll tell you what you should do physically. Move on.'

'What?' Cassie was surprised at her lack of hesitation.

'I think you should leave, Cassie,' she said. 'It's not the first time I've thought about it. Don't be upset, but Mia and I have talked about you once or twice since she left. She worries about you, you know.'

'Does she,' said Cassie, simultaneously indignant and moved.

'Why don't you get out of South Africa for a while?' said Inneke.

'I'm going up to Edinburgh soon. For Christmas.'

'Mia mentioned that. But I meant, for longer than a holiday. Just get out of here and try something new. It's done wonders for Mia.'

'But I'm half-way through my degree.'

'So do the other half some other time. The university will still be there when you get back,' said Inneke. 'You need to change your priorities. Look at what's happened to you. You never took a moment's rest.'

'No. I know. I should have taken some time out.' Beneath the wicker chair, Tosca nibbled delicately at her foot.

'So do it now. Go and stay with Helena and Mia. They'd be happy to have you.'

'What would I do, though?'

'Anything. Work in a pub. Become a busker. Or do something else completely. Go to Paris for six months. Just take some time to find out who you are now.'

Cassie looked over into the fiery cat's-eyes that only Inneke's third child had inherited. 'Did Mia put you up to this?' she said, finding that she didn't really mind either way.

'As I said, we've talked about you,' said Inneke, looking down to refill her tea-cup. Cassie thought she might have caught a smile.

As she drove home, gifts for the De Villiers girls now sharing the passenger seat with the gift from Ben, Cassie tried to figure out why she was here at all. Sam's family had left and would soon be leaving again. Mia was gone. There was nothing tying her to this place that she could not take with her. Then why did she feel that to leave would be to abandon him?

Surely, if Sam was anywhere, he was with those who had loved him, spread in bits and pieces across the world, slipping into their suitcases between the rolled up socks, following his photograph across oceans. Where did she imagine he would reside? Surely not with the German couple in Jonkershoek. Certainly not at the Coetzenberg dam.

Late that night Cassie would dream she was attending a viewing of the body, and only when she awoke, and wrote it down, and remembered from the dream what Sam's remains had been laid out in, would she realise that she had been dancing in circles there at the Loudons' home. All those hyperbolic metaphors her mind had thrown up like a smokescreen to avoid alighting on this most obvious connection, presented at last by the unfettered id. The piano had not looked like an elephant, or an orca, or a naughty trick-or-treater, anything so much as it looked like a coffin. The piano wasn't just Sam's; it was *Sam*, as surely as if he had been lying there in state.

But as Table Mountain tilted into view up ahead, she thought only of the wretchedness of that fate, the wretchedness of enduring only in places you had never set foot in while alive; the sad lot of a ghost in a strange country.

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She was still a few metres from shore when the report of a gunshot sounded. It smacked into the mountain behind her and rolled back across the water. For a moment she was paralysed with fear. No, she thought, no no no.

She was swimming through glue, her muscles weak as they were when she had just woken up. Seven metres from shore she plumbed with a foot; felt silky mud between her toes, not more than an arm's length below. She had been swimming when she could have been wading. She could stand. She stood. At last she made the shore. Halfway up the slope she lost her footing, and without pausing in her movement, she climbed the rest of the way on all-fours. She gained her feet at the top of the ridge.

There was no-one there.

'Sam?' she shouted. 'Mia?'

She felt appallingly vulnerable in her panties and Sam's t-shirt as she stepped onto the mountain path, the sleek trunks of the blue-gums around her bone-coloured in the moonlight.

'Hello?'

There was no answer, no noise at all besides her breathing and her own wet footfalls. Cassie broke into a jog. When she rounded the bend, when she saw him lying there in the dirt with his mouth open and the blood pooling black around his head and into the earth, when she screamed for help and ran and fell to her knees beside him, there was no answer, not a single sound.

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'Harris residence.'

It took her a moment. 'Justin?'

'Yes?'

'This is Cassie.'

'Oh, hello there. How are you?'

'Well, and you?'

'No complaints. You're wanting Alex?'

'Is he home?'

'Yes. Hang on.'

She heard him place the receiver down on the stinkwood cabinet – she could picture it – and listened to the evening noises of the home as filtered through six thousand miles of fibre optic cable. Her stepmother delivering some revelation in an animated voice, and the answering Ah-Heah-Heah-Heah! From her father. It was the laugh she used to think of as his Holiday Laugh; the open-mouthed creaking that meant he was in an expansive mood. Something clattering, and then Justin announcing the call.

*Alex?... Cassie.*

She hadn't recognised his voice at all. It was possibly the longest conversation they had had in four years, she considered.

The last time she had seen Justin Silveira in person was here in Cape Town, in this house, at Christmas. He struck her as more boy than man then, boisterous and recalcitrant by turns, perennially restless, and studiously unimpressed by anything his former home-country had to offer. Alexander Harris had emigrated with his new family when his step-son was only twelve, young enough for subsequent return visits to constitute trips away rather than trips home for him. She remembered the way he defensively emphasised his recently acquired British accent, where her father's quickly frayed at the edges in the company of family and friends. It made her laugh then, the loutish London comprehensive pronunciation so at odds with those preposterous Continental eyelashes, the velvet-black eyes.

'That boy of Lynn's doesn't carry himself very well, does he?' had been her mother's assessment.

He had, admittedly, been a bit awkward at the dinner table. When drawn into the conversation by his hostess, his opinion solicited on rugby versus football culture, he had delivered a short answer in a low, carrying voice, which he terminated with a gesture that sent his soft drink cascading over Nathalie's Mozambiquan table-cloth. Cassie had smiled sympathetically. Justin had glowered.

She heard a throat being cleared, and a moment later her father greeted her.

'I'm not interrupting dinner or anything, am I?' she asked.

'Not at all. It's almost eight.'

Of course. They were early eaters.

She asked for his news, and had so little of her own to offer that she found herself coming to the point with much less hesitation than she had anticipated. 'Dad,' she said. 'I've been thinking about it, and I think I want to stay in the UK for a while after I come up at Christmas.'

She heard him exhaling. 'That's wonderful,' he said. 'We'd love to have you. How long can you stay?'

'Actually, I was thinking of London,' said Cassie. 'I was thinking of working there. Living there for a while. I already have a visa.'

A pause. 'You already got a visa?'

'No, I already *have* a visa. I had it anyway, for when Sam and I were going to go. And I already have a plane ticket over, of course. I'll just have to change the return flight.'

'You mean you want to stay on from December?' said her father. 'That's not much time to plan.'

'It's enough.'

'Is this a good idea?'

'I think it might be.'

'What does Nathalie think?'

'I haven't discussed it with Mom yet.'

'I think you should.'

'I will, soon.' She did not mention how much thought had gone into this omission. Cassie had decided to prepare as much of the battle-ground as she could beforehand, and arrive well-armed. She had already spoken to Mia, and done as much online research as she could. Phoning her father was the final step. Next, she would mount what she thought of as a scouting expedition into enemy territory.

It was not really within Nathalie's power to stop her, she knew. She was an adult now; she could make her own decisions. But it didn't help much to tell herself this. The habit of deference had returned as soon as she had moved back home. Last she had lived under this roof, Nathalie would simply have said no, and that would have been the end of it. Any argument Cassie might have made would have been silenced by five unassailable syllables: I am your *mother*. Even if the words were no longer spoken aloud, Cassie was not at all sure that, at the last reckoning, she could successfully pit her will against the fact.

I'll find out soon enough, she thought.

'Presuming you follow through on this, have you thought about money?' said Alexander Harris.

'I have, yes.'

'And?'



'I don't have enough.' The British authorities demanded to see evidence of a ridiculous amount of money in her bank account, for starters.

'I could pay for your insurance,' said her father.

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*Sognando. Maestoso.*

'Supper time, Cassie,' called Nathalie.

'Coming.'

'Are you all right?'

'I'm fine.'

'What are you doing up there?'

'Nothing.'

This was not quite true. She had intended to do absolutely nothing, and to all appearances she had succeeded. She had not left the house all day, and had spent most of the evening in her room. But in her hands Cassie held, very lightly, between index finger and thumb, the last of the four pages of music that constituted *Nocturne in C* by Samuel Loudon Jr.

There in Jonkershoek she had given them only a cursory glance, waiting for this - privacy, and the right moment - to study them. She knew even then that the gift was a treasure beyond reckoning, but only now did she understand why.

*Poco piu teneramente. Ironico.*

Contained in this work was a side to him that she had never guessed at. Of the music she could make no sense whatsoever, but around the music, in a neat cursive, were words, and these she could read - haltingly. They were marks of expression: advice, guidance, to whoever would play the piece after him, containing information that could be conveyed no other way.

*Maestoso*, Cassie said softly.

And Ben had said he was thirteen when he heard it, which made Sam seventeen.

On the first page - the one she had looked at in Jonkershoek - he had been reticent, offering only the odd workaday *legato* or *pianissimo*. But as the piece progressed he became bold and exacting in his counsel. "*Con molte tristezza*" his orthographical voice pleaded in one bar, "*in aumento coraggio*" he coaxed in the next, and then - her heart contracted - "*impassionatissimo*."

Was this Sam? This sensorian prodigy, invoking emotions of which his heart as yet surely had poorer mastery than his hands?

It was not that he couldn't be impassioned or tender himself, and certainly he could play with passion and tenderness, and all the rest. But that he should conjure these sentiments up *by name*,

that he should implore the player to pluck them from the spruce and maple innards of a piano, *by name*, that was another thing altogether. A whole nother story, as he would have said, despite her frequent protestations that there was no such word as 'nother'. It was the difference between a good poet and a good lover.

By the time she had met him, Sam had already made the one great paradigm shift of his musical life – perhaps his life in general – in his discovery of and whole-souled commitment to jazz. The only marks of expression she had ever seen on his own work, written on a composition that looked like a war zone and sounded like a ten-car pileup, were the words '*dig it*', '*dig it more*', and then, near the end, '*you DIG?*' Sam, having been subjected to Cassie's inquiring regard, had laughed, and said it was half joke, half enthusiasm, and that the only marks of expression proper to jazz, and also implicit, and therefore redundant, were *ad liberatum*.

She had reached the last page, and felt already breathless, and sated, as if she had just completed a grail quest, or read a *bildungsroman* from cover to cover. Towards the end he had written *con ùmiltà* – with humility, then *con compassione* – with compassion – and finally, given mandate over eight bars, with a careful hand, the letters separated as if he might have made sure of his spelling once or twice in the course of writing it, but with a capital bold enough to indicate he had no doubt about his judgement in the matter, was his final exhortation: *con meraviglia*.

She frowned. What was that, then?

Thus far, Cassie had muddled her way competently through the Italian, but now, defeated, she went down to the shelf where the reference books were kept and located her mother's university Italian dictionary.

'It's getting cold,' said Nathalie from the kitchen.

'I'm wearing a jersey.'

'Your food, Cassie.'

'In a minute, Mom.' She smiled quickly, and turned for the stairs.

'Cassie?'

Cassie realised too late that the quick smile had been a mistake. 'Yes?'

'When you're done with whatever you're doing up there, I'd like to talk to you.'

'Okay, Mom.' So she had remembered the date. *Your deadline has passed, my girl. As of tomorrow you must demonstrably have Moved On.* It was time to tell her mother about London. But not right now. Cassie escaped back up the stairs with the dictionary.

Menzione, menzognere, meramente, meraviglia. There, above a cascade of declinations of the verb *meravigliare*, to amaze, astound, or throw, she found it:

*meraviglia* 1. s.f. wonder.

*Con meraviglia*: with wonder.

There was a second definition beneath:  
*meraviglia* 2. s.f. (bot) love-lies-bleeding.

She took from underneath her bed the journal she had started keeping at Dr. Patel's request.  
*How did I miss this?* She wrote. She paused. Then,  
*Why didn't you tell me?*

It was November the thirtieth.

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One year after Sam Loudon's heart stopped beating for the second and last time, his best friend decided it was time to consummate her relationship with her boyfriend.

'I'm going to Matt's,' she said to her sister.

'Oh, okay.'

'Um.' She's not my mother, thought Mia. 'I might stay over.'

'Okay,' said Helena. That took a while, she thought.

Mia would have been inclined to agree. Their first kiss, like her first first kiss, had been long in coming, and she saw no reason to delay the logical conclusion any longer.

They had been to three movies, had four dinners, seen a show, and taken two long walks; Matt had said hello and goodbye to her at four different tube stations ten different times, and three times at her front door, before the evening that he finally lingered eloquently outside it, like a bellboy. It was she who leaned forward. His hands where they alighted on the small of her back were undemanding, and the skin of his lips was dry. He had kept his eyes open.

Tonight, he had invited her over for supper.

When she arrived, she stood ringing the doorbell for some minutes outside the gate of his flat complex in Lambeth. At last his flatmate answered the intercom and let her in. She found Matt wet and steaming, shoeless, and only barely in clothes.

'I'm terribly sorry you had to wait,' he said, looking a little nonplussed. 'I was in the shower. I didn't hear the doorbell.'

'That's all right,' said Mia, wondering with mild annoyance what he had been doing in the shower at seven thirty when he knew she was arriving at seven thirty. From what she had gathered, it was not like him to be inconsiderate.

She sat in the lounge paging through a car magazine while she waited for him to dress, then waited further while he set about preparing their main course. At last, bored of being alone, she joined him in the kitchen.

No man had ever cooked for Mia before, and she hovered curiously in the kitchen until he asked her, gently, to leave. 'It's a surprise, you see,' he said.

'Can I look around, then?' she said. They had stopped here briefly once before, when he had come home to change before they went out again, but she had not yet seen anything of the flat beyond the lounge.

That had been a Sunday, a good day, their best so far. It had started with lunch in Hyde Park, and ended with dinner in Chelsea.

'Oh. By all means,' said Matt. 'My bedroom might be a bit messy. I haven't really had a chance to tidy up yet, I'm afraid.'

'I am warned,' said Mia.

Had ended, in fact, with Mia inviting him in for coffee in Tooting, with every expectation of proceeding directly on to breakfast in bed. She had neatened her room with care before leaving the house to meet him. That he had not had the same foresight tonight was either charming or insulting, she would decide which once she saw what he meant by 'a bit messy'.

But except for his last change of clothes draped on the bed, his bedroom was immaculately clean, and very spare, except for the books. There were more books than there were bookshelves to hold them, and she thought this might be the mess he had referred to; these volumes lining the skirting boards in rows two deep, very little of it fiction. History, biographies, a lot of textbooks. Gould. Eco. Le Carre's skulked sheepishly beneath his desk. The room smelled of cotton. There was nothing on the walls.

He had declined the coffee, that night. She was not sure why.

It had been the kind of date that didn't end when it was scheduled to, for all the best reasons: good weather, conversation that proliferated endlessly and without effort, and a sense that, even as they spoke, and walked, and found new excuses not to part ways just yet, they were revelling in the shared hunch that, however this might end, it would not be with a phone-call and a grey feeling.

That he had not wished to consecrate this watershed that night puzzled her, and irked her – she was not accustomed to being turned down.

She went back out into the hallway, and smiled to hear him humming in the kitchen; the only sound he made. Matt was not a cutlery-clatterer or a banger of drawers.

The same, she guessed, could not be said of his flatmate, Davy, who she could hear moving around even through a closed door. He was listening to what sounded like eighties techno and shouting 'Yes! YES! YES!'

'Ready for a taste?' called Matt. Mia went into the kitchen.

'What's your flatmate doing?' she asked.

'A Tony Robbins audio-course, I believe.'

'Well. That's a relief... Is that for our dessert?' There was a saucepan on the stove, full of something delicious-looking and chocolate smelling.

'No, this is for the main course.'

'Chocolate?'

'Just wait.' He was cutting something. 'Right then. Could you close your eyes and open your mouth, please?'

Mia did as she was asked, and a moment later she tasted metal, chocolate, chilli and meat. She started, grimaced, fought the urge to spit.

'That good, eh?' said Matt.

'What is it?' said Mia with her mouth full.

'Chocolate chilli steak. Do you not like it?'

'No, it's, but, Matt, I don't eat red meat.'

'Oh, no!' said Matt, aghast. 'I completely forgot. I'm so sorry.'

He offered to put the sauce in an omelette, or pour it over a tin of tuna. Mia laughed, and said she would eat it by itself. He said he would do the same. For supper they had salad, chocolate chilli sauce and Cabernet, sitting together on the long couch in the living room.

Halfway through a china bowlful of the stuff, Matt apologised, yet again, for the blunder, and then, frowning miserably as he shouldered responsibility for the manifold imperfections of the evening, he added a further apology that she had caught him so generally unready when she arrived. 'It's just,' said Matt, 'I thought I was expecting you at half eight.'

'I arrived at half eight,' said Mia.

'Ah,' said Matt, checked his watch, the wall clock. 'I'm pretty sure you arrived at half seven.'

'No, I definitely...' said Mia, and then realised what had happened: it was a mistake she hadn't made since her first week in London. 'Oh dear,' said Mia. 'I'm a moron.' She explained that, directly translated, half eight meant seven thirty in Afrikaans, not eight thirty.

Matt laughed, and Mia laughed, simultaneously touched, impressed, and appalled, by his excessive courtesy. Why had it taken him two and a half hours to get round to pointing out that she had arrived early? If he was that terrified of causing offence, they were never going to get anywhere at all.

She put down her spoon and said to him, close your eyes and open your mouth.

He complied unhesitatingly, and she leaned towards him and ran the length of her tongue between his lips. His eyes flicked open wide, then narrowed, and she saw the irises ripple around his widening pupils, as if a pebble had been tossed into them. Some minutes later she started to unbutton his shirt. He watched her with the trusting concern of a Labrador having its stitches out at the vet.

'Are you sure about this?' he said, as she proceeded south to his trousers.

Of course she was sure. They'd been going out for almost a month. 'Why, aren't you?' said Mia.

'I don't have, you know, anything.'

'You don't?'

'No.'

'Really?'

'I'm sorry.'

'That's okay.' Unassuming, to say the least. Idiotic, to say a little more. Why on earth had he invited her over at all? 'What about Davy?'

'What about him?'

'Maybe he has.'

'You want me to ask him?'

'Is that not the done thing in London?'

'It's not the done thing in this flat.' But he rose anyway, and left the living-room, soundless on his feet.

She heard him knocking on Davy's door. Three times he said, Davy? And then there was an inaudible exchange. That is, Matt's half of it was inaudible. Davy's half consisted of a guffaw, and the words 'Fletchy's getting a leg over.' Mia smiled.

Armed and sheepish, Matt returned. He had rebuttoned his shirt in the hall, she saw. Correctly. Every button.

It was Mia who found candles and lit them, Mia who selected and put on music. She undressed him and then undressed herself. For this, she made the space her own. Cat-tongues of slow flame on the walls and under her breasts and along the length of him where she moved.

Any minute now, thought Matthew Fletcher, she would notice he was only human, and recoil, dismayed, at his deception. So much colour and such a play of rare light! If it was true that falling in love was the process of being offered a series of pleasantly distorted mirror images of oneself, he suspected that in the mirror she offered him, he had no reflection at all. Already he knew he would fall for her hard, and that he would probably end up getting hurt, and that he would have neither the skill nor enough courage of his convictions to prevent these events from taking their course.

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'I remember waving goodbye and not realising what it meant really,' said Mia afterwards, still naked and now smoking. 'I remember him walking away, to the car, and thinking he'd be back that evening, or sometime soon, like after a business trip.'

'You mean he didn't tell you he was leaving?' said Matt.

'Oh no, he told us, they told us together, but I was only six. I didn't get it. Although I did wonder why he was taking the dog with him.'

'He took the *dog*?'

She shrugged. 'It was his dog.'

'I'm sorry,' said Matt.

Mia shrugged. There is a basic divide, she thought, between the children of happy marriages and children of unhappy marriages. The most obvious hallmark of people on his side of the divide was that they said 'I'm sorry,' when they heard this kind of story.

There had been that same divide – the only divide really – between her and Sam, the only part of her that Cassie could understand and Sam could not.

'I miss that dog,' said Mia, and realised, with a shock, that he must be long dead by now, old Brakenjan, who had kept her safe during all her childhood wanderings.

The four girls had grown up in a battleground of acronyms. Not only words, they learned, but letters too, were dangerous, volatile things. There was something called *Die A en C*, and something called *Die NP*, and then one she was familiar with, called *Die NG Kerk*. She knew that one because she had been baptised there and her parents were married there and furthermore she passed through the grounds every time she cycled into the Dorp. Why her parents would argue over an ugly building was beyond her, but then again she never understood much of the way people behaved in those days.

Matt's parents were amiably married; still lived in Northumberland where he and his brother had grown up, although after his parents retired they had moved from Newcastle to his father's birthplace, a small town in Sunderland which bore the alarming name of Hetton-le-Hole.

When Matt spoke to them on the phone for any length of time, the Geordie welled up in his throat until the vowels would be doled out in great nutritious ladlefuls, as if he were speaking through a mouthful of shepherd's pie.

Mia had not yet met them. She had spoken to Matt's father briefly once, when she had answered his phone while he was in the bathroom. His voice was a condensed version of Matt's, and she pictured him as a condensed version of Matt, stockier, swarthier, shorter, all of which Matt confirmed. A great yarn-spinner, Matt said. Used to keep us enthralled for hours.

Mia's father had been the story-teller of their family too, she told him. They would get their bedtime stories in her parents' room, as there were too many of them to tuck in separately.

'Usually they had us four in them, and we could each pick one person, or a character, besides ourselves who would be in the story. And our dog Brakenjan was always there. In the stories he was a magic dog – a talking dog – that was my favourite part.'

'What were the stories about?' asked Matt.

He had been inventive, and fluid as a seal, and towards the end, matched her for ferocity. (It was self defence, he would say months later.) She was on the whole pleasantly surprised. But now he lay curled as if repenting with his head on her stomach. The breath of these words disturbed her pubic hair.

'All sorts of things,' she said. 'But they always started the same way. "*En toe kom ons by 'n groot yster hek.*"' She had automatically adopted her father's story-telling voice to speak those words, the years in between falling away as she relived it. She remembered fending off sleep against their father's flank, the limbs of her sisters still pink and warm from their baths.

'It means, "And then we came to a huge iron gate,"' said Mia.

'That's how it started? It started in the middle?' said Matt.



'All stories do,' she had said. 'Most just leave out the 'and'.'

## Full Cold Moon

'And who do you think is going to pay for your insurance?' said Nathalie Harris. She had not taken the news well.

'Dad says he'll help.'

'You've already spoken to your father?'

'We've discussed it, yes. As an idea.'

'Oh. I see. So I'm the last to know.'

"The last?" You make it sound as if I've consulted a dozen other people. I *had* to establish whether it was even possible before I talked to you about it.'

'Why?'

'Because of this, Mom. Precisely because I knew you would react this way.'

Nathalie plopped another knife into the drying rack. They were in the kitchen, Nathalie washing dishes, Cassie drying.

Cassie had not intended the discussion to progress this far. She had planned to drop the suggestion casually into her mother's path, as a sort of whimsical musing, just to gauge her reaction, in preparation for a firmer proposal later on. But it had spiralled out of her control, as she should have guessed it would.

'There's still a whole year left on my visa,' said Cassie.

'What about your degree? What about all that work you put it?' Nathalie continued, scrubbing furiously at a wok.

'It won't go to waste. I can pick up where I left off when I come back.'

'You'll lose your scholarship, you know.'

'I'll talk to them about it.'

'But Cassie... I thought... I thought you were doing *better*,' said Nathalie, changing tack.

'I am, Mom.'

'Then why do you want to leave?'

'Because I want to keep getting better.'

'This isn't the way to do it, Cassie. If you toss yourself into the deep end of a totally strange world, especially a hard world like London, you'll never cope. And there won't be anyone around to help you if you need help.'

'Mia's there.'

'Mia's just a girl. I know she's your friend, but she's young, she has her own concerns. You can't expect her to support you emotionally. You need your family for that.'

'Dad's there.'

Nathalie laughed a small, ugly laugh. 'Your father. Your father. What does he know about what you've been through? Where was he when his only child went through the worst ordeal of her life? In another country.'

'Ja, and whose fault is that?' It was out before she could stop herself. It surprised her completely; she felt the gut-shot herself. Seventeen years had gone by between then and now without such an exchange, nor any intimation of such an exchange in the offing.

Nathalie went very still, her face betraying the kind of pain that leaves the features expressionless. Having gone a step too far, Cassie decided two or three more couldn't hurt.

'Do you think I don't remember?' she went on.

Cassie heard the plosive sound and felt the wet impact, she even saw the movement of her mother's arm. But it nevertheless took her a few beats to register that Nathalie had just slapped her through the face. She touched her moist and tingling cheek, and looked again at her mother's hand, now held in an unintentionally poetic gesture at her side, as if to confirm that the distance between the two had indeed been closed a few seconds earlier. It was a lovely hand, graceful and adept, a hand that could make an artwork of a spray of white gladioli in a silver vase simply by foregrounding them against an indigo dressing screen; that could peel a green leaf away from a film of cooking chocolate so delicately that the imprint of its veins would be left behind. A hand that a thousand times had held Cassie's hair bunched behind her head while the other pulled a brush through the tangles in exasperated yanks. That entropy-reversing hand that left order and beauty in its wake wherever it went. The woman's touch. A glob of foam slid down her mother's knuckle and landed on the tiles.

'You don't know what you're talking about,' said Nathalie Harris calmly, and picked up another plate.

An hour later, Cassie lay in the bath, everything but her nostrils underwater, watching the ceiling fresco swim (the Byzantine, her mother's pet period) and wondering if that were true. Neither of her parents had ever offered her any reason for the split beyond the vaguest platitudes, what Cassie thought of as the 'IJDW' school of explanation. It Just Didn't Work. She assumed they had at some point agreed that this would be the party line. In truth her six-year-old perceptions of what had passed between them during those last years were far from clear. Was it years? It might have been months, or even weeks, child-time passes slowly. But she had memories of her father reaching out with his arms or his eyes or his voice, and her mother like a door slammed shut. It was enough, in that moment, to

muster up the conviction and the spite necessary to say what she had said. Could she be blamed for forming her own impressions?

When she sat up again, Cassie noticed that she had company. There was a butterfly floating in the water just above her shins. It was a Monarch, the first she had seen this year, and one of many to have met with this fate. For reasons best known to themselves, the caterpillars, grown fat and toxic on the milkweed shrubs in the garden, often chose to crawl through the bathroom window and suspend their chrysalides from the security grille above the bath. By January they would be strung there in clusters like tiny, potent tropical fruits on a vine, only to drop to a watery grave when they emerged, dazed and weak, from their transformation.

She cupped a hand under the butterfly and allowed the water to filter between her fingers. The insect perched forlornly on her palm, its wings trailing. As a child Cassie had been delighted by their apparently trusting nature, until her father explained to her that butterflies had no choice in the matter: they could not take off until the blood in their wings had been warmed to a certain temperature. This one was unlikely to be going anywhere soon. But it might, at a pinch, survive.

Cassie climbed out of the bath, grabbed a towel in the other hand, and went through to her room, where she placed the butterfly on one of the desiccated leaves of the long-expired potted palm in the corner. Wrapping the towel around herself, she lay on her bed and reached for her journal on the nightstand.

*It's at times like this that I wish I was more like you, she wrote.*

*I know you would be across the hall sorting it all out right now, apologising, throwing her down and tickling her if necessary, anything to make peace. Instead I'm hiding in here with a dead plant and a half-dead insect for company.*

This had been the first fight in a long time actually to come to anything. There had been so many cold wars between them over the years that their conflicts no longer required any manifest changes in behaviour to be acknowledged as such. They could talk together and shop together and make meals together, never an angry word spoken, and yet they would be fighting. Eventually the tension would peter out and the simulated harmony would roll over seamlessly into conventional harmony once more. It had become the path of least resistance, and they were content, for the most part, to walk on separate sides of it.

She rolled over onto her back to greet the familiar view of Orion and all his cohorts, picked out in plastic stars by her own hand. There were Canis Major and Minor, Lepus the hare, Monoceros the Unicorn, whom she knew from childhood as Moonchaser. There also was the hunter's prey, Taurus, and those gathered to watch the showdown; Pollux and Castor and the Seven Sisters.

She had done it years ago; the final attempt of many to superimpose her emerging identity onto her mother's; to transform this room which had been hers since before her birth into a space that was unequivocally her own.

It had started with the usual weak cries of self-affirmation; posters and loud music and sporadic rearrangements of her furniture. At sixteen she had decided to do it all at once and thoroughly. She had planned it well, for once thinking everything through before she started. She spent days balanced on a stepladder, first rolling on a layer of velvety midnight blue, then staking out the constellations with a pencil, and finally sticking on the glow-in-the-dark stars she had amassed for this purpose. Next she attacked the walls, scraping off the aging nubs of Prestik where she had hung the graven images of a dozen brief devotions, and triumphantly obliterating the coral-pink that had served her through babyhood and girlhood.

'It's all so dark,' said Nathalie Harris, watching from the doorway as Cassie vigorously sponged a deep-sea spectrum of blues and moody greens over the fresh coat of white. 'It makes me feel like I'm drowning.'

'Well, I like it,' said Cassie.

'You'll be sick of it in a month, and then what?'

She had relented with good grace in the end, offering to provide the price of new bedclothes and curtains. Even then they argued, Nathalie voting for French navy and white, while Cassie was set on jade green.

Cassie glanced across the room to the potted palm. The butterfly had turned its stern towards the glow of the bedside lamp, the spread wings pulsing. Orange and black; the universal shorthand for *poisonous*. How many Monarchs would one have to eat to die? she wondered. A dozen? A hundred? She imagined stuffing them down her throat by the handful, teeth crunching down on legs and antennae, lips furred with powdery wing-scales. *CASSIE HARRIS TRAGICALLY FLUTTERED TO DEATH AT AGE 22*. What would her mother have to say about that? She smiled, reliving from a distance the satisfaction that she had derived from such little fantasies when she was of a door-slamming age, and Nathalie still had automatic victory in any dispute by dint of the special class of logic that she reserved for these occasions. Cats are mortal. Socrates is mortal. I am your *mother*. Therefore, Socrates is a cat.

It was watertight. It was ironclad. There was no way around, under, over or through it, and all Cassie could do to avenge herself against its maddening efficacy was to storm up to her room, where often as not she had been ordered to go anyway, and, in the privacy of her inner world, make her mother very, very sorry.

Face-down on a tear-smeared pillow, she had revelled in images of policemen knocking at the door, family members wreathed in black, her mother's endless remorse. In her early teens, when the fascination with her own mortality was at its keenest, she had concocted endless scenarios of this kind. But it had started years earlier, when she was still in North Stars and dungarees. *CASSIE HARRIS, AGE 7, KIDNAPED BY JAHOVA'S WITNESES*. It was probably still in the family archives

somewhere; the first such bulletin she had ever authored, and the only one ever to be set down on paper.

It had begun as a plan, publicly announced and publicly ignored, to run away from home. Finding herself too timid to venture much beyond the corner of the block, Cassie had settled instead for the fictive consequences of her escape from tyranny. *Cassie ran away because she had been made to stay in her room for hours and hours for no reason at all. The kidnapers have not been found but the child is presumed dead. 'I only wish I had a chance to say sorry for being such a mean woman,' says the child's mother, Nathalie.*

She had had only the vaguest notion of what a Jehovah's Witness was; a shadowy figure whose mere approach down their street would cause her parents to switch off the stereo and cower inside the house with the curtains closed. She had left the report on the dining-room table among the weekend papers, but to her annoyance it had provoked nothing more from her parents than a roar of unrepentant laughter.

*No more empty threats, wrote Cassie. This time I'm actually going to do it, for her as much as myself. We've been under each other's skins for far too long.*

It was inevitable that mother and daughter would grate against each other. Cassie was so obviously her father's child. She could feel from inside the skin of her face how her features behaved like his these days – the chin jerking when she was caught out or nonplussed, the forehead smoothing to blankness rather than creasing when she was annoyed. A decade and more beyond his influence could not prevent the blood from speaking out its claim. You see here, your fingers, he had said to her many times when she was younger. You've got my hands. And so she had; the same long, square-ended fingers, the generously bowed thumb. You have your mother's feet, thank God, but your hands are mine.

She had long ago guessed that the reason she and her mother fought more often as she became older was that she was growing naturally into him. And her parents were, in the end, incompatible. That was nobody's fault.

Cassie stood up. If she really meant to leave soon, she had to make amends at a much quicker pace than they had become used to.

She crossed the passage to her mother's room. The thread of darkness at the bottom of the door showed that Nathalie had already gone to bed, but Cassie turned the handle anyway and opened the door a crack.

'Mom? Are you awake?'

She heard a high, creaky yes. Oh God, had she been crying? Had she made her mother cry?

'I'm so sorry, Mom.'

'So am I.'

'I am going to go, though.'

'I know.'

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Scalp wounds bleed profusely, Cassie told herself, when quite clearly a cut scalp was the least of his problems. This and some other utterly useless information were all that returned to her from the first aid course they had done in Std. 8. If he wasn't breathing she could do artificial respiration, if he didn't have a pulse either she could do CPR, but he was and he did, faint but perceptible in both cases. If he was choking she could have done the Heimlich manoeuvre, follow the ribcage with one finger, make a fist under the diaphragm and put the other hand on top of it and thrust thrust thrust. Easy. If he had a broken ankle she could splint it with blue gum branches and let him lean his weight on her shoulder and tell him it was just a few more metres. If he had been shot somewhere else, in a limb, she could have made a tourniquet out of the t-shirt. She had a vague idea that it would be dangerous to move him. Or was that only spinal injuries?

The trouble with first aid courses is that no one ever tells you what to do when your boyfriend has been shot in the head and the person who shot him may or may not be hiding in the forest, when he may or may not have the gun that shot your boyfriend pointed at your best friend's head, and when he may or may not be waiting for a chance to shoot you too.

Nobody had told her what to do, so she decided herself, the most difficult thing she had ever done in her life, surely the most difficult thing she would ever do. If there was worse to come, she didn't want to live any more. She decided to leave him there.

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In the twentieth minute of her seventh hour in Frankfurt airport, Cassie no longer had the presence of mind or the strength of will to curb the febrile may-poling of her thoughts, such as they were, from the innocuous to the fraught; an art of which, in bygone months and less exhausted states, she had become something of a master.

It was an eight-hour stopover and she had arrived tired, never having mastered the knack of sleeping on airplanes. As a token effort to keep her mind on the present, she was watching the clocks on the wall. It was presently 1. 45 pm in New York, 2.45 am. In Tokyo, 6.45 pm in London. Here in Frankfurt, it was 7.45 pm.

She rolled her broad shoulders, were it not for which she might have passed for willowy, and curled her spine, and let down her hair, which she had put up because the straps of her backpack had caught in it so many times.

Frankfurt. With that New York clock in front of her, she could not think the word without sounding it, internally, in movie-Brooklynese, Cagneyfying the diphthong, as Sam used to do when his mind was at play in West 52<sup>nd</sup> Street. Frankfoit.

New York was a place she had always wanted to go, and never had. Tokyo was a place she thought she could do without. London she had seen before and was on her way to again. Frankfoit was a place she had never particularly wanted to be in, and was, if being in the borderless kingdom of Airportland counted. The woild's waiting room.

Cassie did not mind. She was good at waiting.

The metal seat she had found was far from accommodating, but despite the discomfort she found her vision swimming and her head listing to starboard.

Behind her a man was talking into his mobile phone, and because she heard the sound as though through a layer of cotton batting between her cochlea and her brain, she realised that she was falling asleep again and jerked herself awake.

'I'm still in Bath, babycakes. I'll be back very late,' said the man with the phone. He sounded like he was from London, and was on his way back there, no doubt. He would be on the same plane as she. Perhaps they could share a cab. Perhaps he had meant in *the* bath, but either way, it wasn't true.

He's lying, he's in Frankfoit, she said to herself, then started when the man on the cell-phone started: she hadn't thought she had spoken loudly enough to be heard. She hoped, in vain, that babycakes at the other end of the airwave had heard her too.

Sam would be turning twenty-three soon. Would have been. Was going to. Cassie sat in Frankfurt Airport navigating the syntax of grief and listening to great big white lies and thinking about Sam's twenty-first birthday.

Her hand strayed to the zip of her hold-all, and she felt inside for her travel wallet. The edge of her thumb knew the respective spines of each document so well by now that she could take inventory without even glancing down. She found the corner of the page of newsprint, folded and refolded, that she had slipped into it between her passport and her traveller's cheques, and unfolded it once again. The two second-born sons. The two mothers. The two dead men.

Before she left, Cassie had, at her mother's request, taken down the imbricated scales of the Wailing Wall. She had placed the bulk of it in a cardboard box in her cupboard, with file dividers separating chunks haphazardly by topic. It would have been impractical to take it with her, and besides, the hardcopy was all but useless without the shape the wall had given it, without that map of conquest. She had transcribed what she needed. Of the great paper trail, the warren of metatruth and metareconciliation, she had brought only this one piece with her: an article clipped from the *Sunday Times*. Mia would want to see it.

Accompanying the article were three photos. One of two women, one of two boys, and one of a young man.

Certain people believe that the camera steals a piece of the subject's soul.

Cassie was not one of these people.

Certain other people claim that they can tell by looking at a photo if the person there depicted is dead or alive; that whatever shard of soulstuff the camera has stolen from them gets taken back, and you can see it. Cassie was not one of these people either.

It was Nathalie who had come across it in the paper, one week after Cassie had gone to say goodbye to the Loudons.

'Did you know about this?' she had said.

Cassie had indeed known about it. She had not known it was going to get press coverage.

So that explained the Butshingis' ready agreement to Dianne's invitation, she had thought. An exclusive for – she checked the by-line – Rebecca Petrangeli had to be worth something. Who had hatched this little scheme? she wondered. Was it the man with the obstinate anvil of a face in the background of the biggest photo, or the older one, with the salt and pepper hair and the deep furrows by his mouth, who stood with a hand on his shoulder? Perhaps even the grandmother; she had a hard-bitten, practical look about her. *Gogo Butshingi*, thought Cassie.

In the grainy foreground were Mrs. Dianne Loudon and Mrs. Bheki Butshingi. *Mothers united in grief*, read the caption. Mrs. Bheki Butshingi, thought Cassie. Mr. and Mrs. Butshingi and their son, Isaac. He probably had a Xhosa name too, she considered. She wondered what it might be and whether it had an interesting meaning and why he didn't go by it. Perhaps he did go by it among his own. Had gone by it.



Benjamin, whose name meant 'son of my old age', was in the background of the same photo, facing the camera but not looking into it, or at any of the proceedings. He stared a few degrees north of the middle distance with a wicket-keeper's sunscowl on his fine brown face, brows drawn down. There was light on his cheekbones and forehead, but his ocular orbits had caught the shade. His hands were in his pockets.

The photographer, possibly under Rebecca Petrangeli's instruction, had clearly decided that Ben was the more captivating character in this little fable: there was a second picture of him, with what turned out to be Isaac Butshingi's younger brother.

Certainly he made for an arresting image, with his hair of gold and his face this time fully chiaroscuroed, this young prince, this knight errant, returned from the land everyone there pictured had surely dreamed about at least once, California. Both boys were seated, with their elbows on their knees, and one hand cupping their respective chins, Ben's arms long and brown, the Butshingi boy's longer and browner. Ben's mouth was open, his lips frozen in the set for an 'eu' sound, and the other boy's closed, but other than that they had mirrored each other's posture to a nicety. It had to be for real; even in her jaded mood Cassie could not conjure up a convincing image of Rebecca Petrangeli arranging their limbs.

Their eyes were locked in this shot, almost confrontationally, certainly sizing each other up, as if it was a chess board that lay between them rather than two dead bodies and a socioeconomic universe.

She, Cassie, might have been in that picture, or had a picture of her own. Perhaps Isaac Butshingi had a bereaved sweetheart that the photographer could have twinned her with.

She had cast an eye over the article (that is, she read every word twice) and plucked out the summary of the investigation. Rebecca Petrangeli had done some fruitful nosing around: one or two of the details had been new to Cassie. She had not, for instance, known that since her last conversation with Detective Plaatjies, an informer had confirmed the motive for Isaac Butshingi's flight to the mountains: his accomplice had abandoned him, taking the car. Badly mauled by the Buurmans' dog, Isaac Butshingi could not risk the road in daylight and on foot for fear of drawing attention.

So there was an accomplice. Cassie hadn't known that either.

There was a fourth photograph, on which she had lingered longest then, and on which she lingered now. This was an older picture and she knew it well; a copy stood on her bedside table in Rondebosch in a gold frame, and another print in a similar frame stood on a mantelpiece in San Francisco. Sam smiling wide with his eyebrows raised as if on the point of a comeback. It had been taken on his twenty-first birthday, just after he opened his gift from his parents: the keys to a 1998 528i Beamer.

No photo of Isaac Butshingi to complete the symmetry. No yang to this yin. Perhaps there simply were no photos of Isaac Butshingi in the world, a world that contained dozens, hundreds, of photos of Sam Loudon. None in which he didn't have an entry wound in his forehead, anyway. Instead they had

printed the identikit sketch; that same anonymous work that had been circulated among the Cape police departments and had been printed in the *Argus* and that had made its way onto eTV news.

Cassie had snipped out the article and pinned it, with an impassive gesture, to the wall of her father's study, not unaware that the impassiveness was in itself an act of flagrant melodrama. She hoped that Dianne had got what she wanted out of it. And she hoped, for the sake of that old grandmother, that the story had fetched a good price.

Lulled into torpor, she sat with her lids at half-mast, the steady hum of Frankfurt International receding into white noise. A cryptic narrative, half-dream, half-memory, followed its own sweet logic across her paths of thought, ghost images overlaid on the rows of steel chairs with their tired piles of luggage and people, lending their remembered colours to the drab fluorescent light. There was a beach, and it was sunset, and she trotted barefoot in the surf beside her father, he striding just beyond the water's reach to save his shoes. They walked and looked at shells and seaweed and watched the seagulls wheeling until the stars came out. They were actually always out, but they were very far away, and when the sun was up there was too much light to see them. The sun was actually always up too, but sometimes the Earth faced away from it and that's what made it night-time. Cassie told her father she wished they weren't so far away, the stars, and he lifted her up onto his shoulders and said, now you're a little closer to them. She put her hands on his face to warm her fingers. His cheeks were rough and she knew the word for that: *stubble*.

'There you are,' he said, pointing. 'The Lady of the Chair.' He took her hand and together they traced an oblique W across the sky.

'Is that me?'

'Yes. That's Cassiopeia.'

The intercom's brisk arpeggio dragged her back to consciousness. It was almost time to board. She was, tentatively, excited.

\*\*\*

Hello, Mee.

Your hair is so long now...

Neither then nor ever afterwards would Mia tell Cassie that upon opening the door, she had been struck by a sentiment, or rather, the swift annulment of a sentiment she had not known she harboured, which could only be described as resentment. What do you want *now*? The part of her that

felt it wanted to say. But instead, of course, she said welcome, and they embraced, and laughed as one does when there is no other custom, and together they dragged her baggage into the house.

'Are you tired?'

'Exhausted.'

'Something to drink then, and afterwards you can crash in my bed,' said Mia. 'I haven't set up the sleeper couch yet.'

'Where will you sleep?'

'I'll bunk with Helena tonight.' She shook her head to stall Cassie's protest. 'It's no bother, really.'

Cassie looked around, taking in the easel, the paint-spattered sideboard and the mugs full of brushes. 'I like your kitchen,' she said.

'Helena despairs of me. She says all her food smells of turpentine.'

Cassie bent to examine a near-completed oil painting leaning against the kitchen door. It showed a street lined with leafless trees, with a lone figure in an overcoat walking off into the distance, his outline indistinct. Mia had used subdued hues of olive green and grey, with an aching light breaking through the clouds here and there.

'You've still got a thing about depicting people from behind, I see,' said Cassie.

'Well, consider my day-job.' Mia smiled. 'There's the inspiration, in case you're interested.' She pointed to a photograph, one of many tacked on the wall above the sink. The scene was identical, down to the overcoat, except that the photograph was black and white. She had used a slow shutter speed to create the blurred effect which Cassie now understood she had duplicated in the painting.

'Is it someone you know?'

'Yes, it's Matt.'

'Oh!' She leaned closer, but the photo did not reveal much of the famous Milton. Mia's e-mails had told little more, which, in Cassie's experience, meant that she was probably in love with him. 'Will I meet him soon?'

'I hope so. Perhaps tomorrow night.'

Cassie's eyes wandered over the rest of the display. She recognised some of the pictures from Mia's home in Stellenbosch. There was one of Helena as a toddler, with Mia between her legs, an even smaller toddler, on the sill of a deep casement Cassie did not recognise, and another of all four girls bathing together in the De Villiers' bathtub, a massive and ancient clawfooted contraption which looked almost seaworthy. Cassie knew which photographs were Mia's own, as much from her distinctive eye as from the fact that these were significantly less battle-scarred than the ones her mother had taken years before.

There were two of Cassie: one taken at the digs in the Old Slave Quarters in Stellenbosch where they had lived together in third year, she and Mia and Sam, and one from first year; one of the set that Mia had used as an adjunct to the painting she had later given Sam. Her back was to the camera, her head bowed, her arms crossed in front of her. She was topless, and her naked cervical vertebrae and scapulae caught the light. Details from another photograph, this one in colour, had been

superimposed on the first, so that it looked like she had eyes in the back of her head. 'I remember this,' she said. 'I hope you don't tell people that's me.'

It had always given her the creeps, as did most of the images Mia had created for that exhibition. 'What?' said Mia, turning from the fridge. 'Oh, that one. But of course I do. I also tell them you're available for weddings and children's parties.'

'I have that painting of yours.'

'I've been wondering what happened to it.'

'My mother's got it in her office.'

Mia made a sing-song 'Hmm' noise. Cassie looked at her, wondering what it might mean, but she was facing the other way.

Cassie turned back to the wall. 'Did you ever - ' She cut herself off.

'Did I ever? Oh...'

Cassie had come across a photograph she had never seen before. There was Sam, lifting her out of the water. Her eyes were closed and her mouth open, and she held one arm arched above her in a mock ballet pose. Sam was looking up at her and laughing. Mountains reared skyward in the background.

'I never saw this,' she said, once she had found her voice.

'It was the last roll I shot before I left,' said Mia. 'I'm sorry, I didn't think. I see it so often I don't notice it anymore.'

'This was that day.'

'Yes.'

'Are there others?'

'A few, upstairs. But this is the only one of you two together.'

'Why didn't you...'

'Why didn't I what? Tell you?'

'I suppose. I don't know. Or send me prints, or something. I don't know. Sorry.'

'Cassie...?'

'I'm all right. It's just. I've been through all my own pictures of him so many times, to see a new one, and here, it's like... well, it's strange, that's all.'

'You don't expect to trip over pieces of him lying around in foreign cities.'

'Especially this piece of him. The last piece.'

'Don't think of it that way.'

'It's a nice photo,' said Cassie quietly.

'It is nice. You can have it if you like.'

'No, it's yours...' But her own hands were already unsticking it from the wall. Mia didn't stop her.

'We look so happy,' said Cassie. Her last memory of him, captured through someone else's eyes. Or not quite the last, but the last one she wanted.

'We were,' said Mia.

A few hours later, Cassie lay in Mia's bed, staring out of the bedroom window into the bilious sodium gloam of the London night and wondering what the hell she was doing here.

Downstairs, she could hear Mia and Helena talking in quiet voices as they cleared away the supper things.

Suspended from the ceiling directly over her head was a dream-catcher of ambitious proportions. In the dim light it looked like a huge dismembered crow. She was sceptical of its abilities to filter out bad dreams: it seemed to be made of the stuff of nightmares itself. Despite her exhaustion and the less than soothing view, she was reluctant to close her eyes. She took out her journal.

*Perhaps that's all the fear of the dark really is, she wrote. A fear of no distractions. The owls of Minerva may come out at dusk, but so do the duck-billed platypi of Loki. The one animal that you can only see with your eyes shut.*

The photo of herself and Sam was tucked in the back of the book. She gazed at it for some five minutes. How strong the arms that buoyed her, how convincing her smile.

Before she had gone to bed, she had shown Mia the Sunday Times article.

'Wow,' Mia had said, reading it. 'That's so brave of Dianne to have done that.'

'Brave?' said Cassie.

'You don't think it's brave?'

*I wouldn't have called it brave, wrote Cassie.*

*Would you have gone? wrote Cassie.*

*Of course you would have, she wrote.*

*And then she wrote, goodnight.*

Mia had recognised the photo of Sam at his twenty-first, with the low sloping rafters behind. 'This was taken at the Christmas House,' she said. 'J Bay, I mean.'

Cassie said, 'You went there?'

Mia said, 'Sure. A few times. Only once at Christmas though.'

'You went there other times?'

'Well, you know our parents have been friends forever.'

'Of course I know that.' And of course she knew what was meant by 'the Christmas House'. Of course Cassie knew where it was.

She put the book away, turned off the light, and closed her eyes. Rolled over to await that long twilight period, those saccades of consciousness upon which her preoccupations would float, colliding gently, like moored canoes, until eventually they subsided into the layered confluence of recollection,

observation, wish and fear, that she had become accustomed to calling sleep. *Cool, very cool, cold, warm.*

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The car keys. The car keys. They would be at the dam. They would be in his, no, he hadn't had pockets, they would be in his towel. She ran back down to the dam and scrabbled through their things. There was nothing in his towel, nothing in her clothes.

For an awful minute she became certain that Mia had taken them, that she had climbed the terraced bank to go the long way round to the car, and had taken the keys with her. But no, here they were in her own tote bag; he must have tossed them in there at some point. She grabbed the bag, ran to the westernmost bank and climbed up the slippery clay slope to the forest. Ran back along the bridle path, thorns and sharp twigs ignored by her feet.

At the paddocks she waited a moment to gather her wits and scan the area between herself and the car for signs of the stranger. She was without a weapon. She looked from left to right on the forest floor for a blue gum switch such as Sam had been playing with earlier, and at last settled on a big rock.

The paddocks were now empty. A few shadowy heads nodded over stable doors to her far right. The unruffled silhouettes brought her a tiny measure of reassurance: surely, if the man with the gun was nearby, the horses would be shying or snorting or whatever it is horses do when they sense danger? Or did they only do that in Dick Francis paperbacks?

What if he was waiting by the car? That was what he had wanted, surely, the car. Or maybe he had just wanted Mia.

Too late to think about that now. Too late to think about a lot of things. She sprinted.

Got to the car. Tried to unlock the door. Swallowed a scream as the alarm blared.

*The button, push the button.* The car responded with a mollified bleep. Cassie flung herself inside and locked the door.

Cassie had always hated Sam's car. That is, she loved it, it was his and it suited him, but she hated driving it, hated its ponderous Teutonic dimensions and its sticky handbrake and the way she had to coax it back to life at stop-streets on cold mornings when she was late, and especially she hated the heavy suspension that left her triceps burning when she parked and unparked. But she loved it now, oh yes she did, loved the no-nonsense ssshook of the central locking, loved the game growl of the engine as she engaged the ignition. She stalled only once as her wet and shaking foot slipped off the clutch. Once she had turned out of the stable yard and back towards the road, she punched 10111 into Sam's cell phone. She was greeted by a smug little error message: *Network failure*. They were too far away from the tower.

She crawled forward along the dirt road, peering through the windshield, terrified of running him over.

When she saw what he looked like crumpled there in the glare of the headlights, unspeakably motionless, it was too much. The artificial sanctuary of the Beamer and the comforting smell of the Sta-Soft refill packs he kept under the seat had brought her adrenalin down just a notch, and she no longer had enough fear beating through her veins to keep her vision sparkly and her muscles fight-or-flight taut, and it was too much. The tears sprang scorching down her face.

He looked like the stuff you swerve around on the N2 because you don't want to skid over animal guts.

Roadkill.

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When Cassie woke the next morning, she experienced that odd sensation of finding that all the walls were in the wrong place before she woke up enough to realise that she was, of course, in someone else's bedroom in another country.

The room was bathed in afternoon light. She usually woke at dawn these days, if she was lucky to sleep even that long. That she had slept through the direct assault of a cloudless autumn noon was evidence, she supposed, for the depth of her fatigue.

Above her head the dream-catcher swayed lugubriously like the mutant child of a Great Auk and a cobweb, weeping dyed feathers and semi-precious stones. She lay in bed for another minute or two, watching the dust-motes swirl and waiting patiently to see what other vital information might arrive her. She was rewarded in due time with the guilty realisation that she had forgotten to alert her mother of her safe arrival in London. She sat up.

On the dresser across from the bed stood another flea-market refugee, a faux Baroque dresser with a triptych mirror, a granny-knot of jewellery and hair-bands hooked around one corner. In its centre was the squat gunmetal hump of Mia's sound-system, with leaning towers of CDs piled around it. More were stacked against the sides of the dresser.

Catching sight of herself, Cassie grimaced. She had been too tired to plait the deluge of molasses that served her for hair before going to sleep the night before, and as usual, it had seized the opportunity to rebel. She located a hairbrush and attempted to beat it into submission. It crackled and fizzed with static electricity. Giving up, she tied the whole lot back, fished a dressing-gown from her luggage and went downstairs. In the bathroom she found a note pinned to the medicine cabinet.

*Hello lazy-bum*

*Your mom called this morning, I told her you were fine and asleep. Give her a ring if you like, the discount service numbers are under the glass on the coffee table. You can also use the computer. I'll*

*be at work till five, why don't you go out and enjoy the town? This evening, if you feel like it, you can meet me and Helena and Matt for the rugby in Shepherd's Bush. Kick-off is at five. We'll prob. Go to a pub called Cat and Dagger, unless it's full, in which case we'll go to the Walkabout . Give me a ring if you have trouble. Help yourself to anything in the fridge, and take the spare keys with you, I left them in the fruit bowl. You might want to pick up a copy of TNT at a news agent's or a bus station if you want to start looking for jobs. It's free.*

The rugby. What rugby? Since when did Mia watch rugby? Kick-off is at five, indeed.

After emailing her father and leaving a message with her mother's secretary at her interior decorating business in town, she cast about for something to fill the hours until she was expected at the pub, and settled, out of all London's manifold splendours, on the Museum of Natural History.

Cassie's walk as she left the tube station at South Ken was her father's walk. Not the gait, not skeletally, but in terms of intention. Neither had ever got the hang of sightseeing or window shopping; the Zen of the promenade. It was not in the Harris nature to be aimless. *Cassie, don't walk like a man*, she thought, her mother's admonition sounding in her ears.

She and her father were both uncomfortable setting out from A if they had not yet decided where B would be, and a good idea of exactly where, pictured having arrived there, standing on whichever X marked the spot, looking at Y, with a view to proceeding to Z when done. It was reassuring to know where one was going in a strange place.

This was her first time alone in London, and the city felt very alien to her. At a loss, she had thought about something her mother had once said, about cathedral-hopping in Europe during a backpacking trip she had taken when she was eighteen. 'No matter what country I was in,' Nathalie had told her, 'when I stepped inside a cathedral I felt like I had come home.'

Mia had said something similar about London's art galleries, Cassie remembered. Seeking that sense of sanctuary, she had considered both the Tate and St. Paul's, although she knew deep down that these lacked for her the necessary interpellation: she had neither her mother's unambitious faith nor Mia's idolatry of past masters to connect her to those worlds. Then the idea of the museum struck her. It was just what she wanted: a place that was, by definition, frozen in the past.

*Don't walk like a man, don't walk like a man, don't walk like a man my da-ah-arling*, Cassie sang, off-key, as she mounted the Earth Escalator. The wall across from her was decked with a much more detailed and accurate chart of the same constellations that adorned her bedroom ceiling.

She passed bones, hooves, shells, teeth. Keratin, carbon, calcium, chitin; all that endures.



Arriving, very slightly out of breath, before the bleak bony grin of the diplodocus skeleton which towered in the central hall of the museum, watched from a respectful distance by various other denizens of prehistory, she came to a halt as if planted there.

'Well met,' she said under her breath.

For all his splendid height and length and girth, he looked rather smaller than she remembered him, as she had guessed he might. She was all of four years old when last she had walked these halls.

Wandering for the second time amongst the stuffed birds and the bits of petrified tree, she remembered her father towing her by her mittened hand from one display to the next, she unable to tear her gaze from the remains of the impossible animal behind her. It was by far the most frightening thing in the room, and yet it was the only one not sensibly enclosed behind glass. 'Cassie, listen,' her father had said. He read the information panels to her slowly, explaining the difficult words, and then told her about this world as if it was a story, so that the great hot soggy landscape came alive to her with its volcanoes and its swamps and the great lizards lumbering. 'Until suddenly they all died, leaving the Earth to the clever little furry things that took their place and became us,' he said.

'They all died?'

'I'm afraid so.'

'Why?'

'Well, nobody really knows, but all in all they were just too big and stupid to keep up with the times.'

'Oh,' said Cassie, looking once more at the diplodocus, now with more sympathy than terror. 'Ag shame.'

Her father laughed. 'Now, this is a bustard, you see...'

It had been her first time overseas. Her father had taken a sabbatical here, and she and her mother had gone to join him for the tail end of it. For Cassie it was just a holiday that wasn't at Grandma and Grandpa's for a change. The flight was a lot longer, it had seemed to last for days, but she was nevertheless surprised when they disembarked to find that only her father was there to meet them. Whenever she had stepped off a plane before it had been into the muggy air of Durban, with her grandparents waiting in the terminal. 'Where's Grandma?' she had said when they entered Heathrow. Her parents laughed. 'This is England, poppet,' said her father. 'You must tell us if you like it here.'

She had liked it very much. She liked the red buses and the red phone booths and the policemen on their horses. She liked sitting on her mother's lap on the underground, following their route along the map above the window and emerging out of the earth to completely new surroundings, as if someone had changed the channel on the TV. She liked the idea of living in a long thin city that had been built in four straight lines and one circle. She endured hours of traipsing around Liberty while her mother examined roll after roll of fabric for the promise of an hour in Hamley's at the end of it all.

Her mother had gone home on urgent business after a month or so, and then it was just she and her father for the last few weeks. That was not as nice because she had to spend hours alone at home with a Swiss au pair that she did not care for. And she missed the stars.

'There's too much light, you see,' her father told her. 'It blots them out. But before we go home, I'll take you somewhere where you can see them all, the whole northern sky. I promise.'

She dawdled so long before each exhibit that the tour group which had entered the building on her heels re-emerged and left, having seen the entire museum. Having arrived back at the entrance, she picked up one of the leaflets on offer, and so she learned the following:

*This is Diplodocus, a plant-eating dinosaur that lived about 150 million years ago. It is one of the longest land animals that ever lived. From tip to tail it measures over 26 metres. King Edward VII, as Prince of Wales, requested this replica when he visited the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh, USA. It was presented to the Natural History Museum in 1905.*

She had to read it twice before she realised what was bothering her.

*Replica.*

She looked up at the dinosaur contemptuously.

'Replica?' she said aloud.

The fake dinosaur continued its perpetual eyeless vigil of the entrance, unmoved. Its face seemed to Cassie suddenly callow and duck-like. It was no more a diplodocus than the hulk of wood and spray-paint hanging from the ceiling in the next room was a blue whale. She laughed a little at herself, at the sense of loss this sorry little revelation had stirred up in her. 'Well, are we a pair of dumbasses, or what?' she said. A security guard in the corner glanced up from his paper. Cassie smiled sanely and dropped her eyes to the information panel next to the display. *Cast of Diplodocus Carnegii*, it read. The truth had been there all along, if she had only looked.

\*\*\*

'Kitt?' said Helena. 'He was *hot*.'

'Kitt was not a he,' said Mia. 'He was an it.'

Cassie listened with one nostalgic ear as the sisters rapidly and volubly began slipping into the garbled argot she thought of as Devillierspeak. She was looking at Matt. Having met him, she realised at last why Mia had compared him to an otter. It was not so much his looks as his manner. The watchful eyes, the quick, unobtrusive movements. There was a suggestion of the river-dweller about him, something that made one feel he would be most at home near mossy rocks and shadow-flecked water.

She had been the first to arrive at the pub that evening, or so she thought, and she sat toying with a monstrously expensive spritzer and glancing over her shoulder at the doorway until she had a crick in her neck.

'Cheer up, Chuckles,' said the barman. 'He'll come if he knows what's good for him.' He winked. She winked back without smiling, iguana-like. Experience had taught her this was a good way to stop compulsive winkers in their tracks.

Halfway through her first drink, Cassie had noticed that she was being watched by a man sitting alone at a table to her right. He dropped his eyes when she looked across, then looked again. She had at last turned her death-stare on him, one eyebrow raised, and to her consternation, he had responded by folding his newspaper, returning it to the rack, and approaching her.

'Sorry to disturb,' he said. 'But are you Cassie?'

She started. 'Yes.'

'We haven't met, but I'm Mia's chap – '

'Milton!'

'No,' he said, frowning. 'Matthew.'

Due to circumstances beyond his control, Matt's mental picture of Cassie up this point had been of a girl with broad shoulders, a mass of undulating greyscale tresses, and eyes in the back of her head.

His further experience of Cassie consisted of the following: one evening at Mia's house, on his way through to the bathroom, he had overheard the tail-end of a spirited analysis of his physical merits and drawbacks. In this way he had learned that he had good hands, that his limbs were "compact and solid", his hairline "in promising condition" and that his abdomen "could do with some work around the pit region", before good upbringing, fear of discovery and reluctance to hear precisely how he handled on curves drew him back behind a softly closed door.

He had also learned that in terms of performance, he was "fresh out the box." What Mia had said was that he, Matt, "might as well be fresh out the box." Mia had been referring, he gathered with first, cautious relief, then newfound insecurity, not to his sexual performance, but to that abstruse female-engineered category that governed one's competence as a mate.

Later, in the recurrently lukewarm Tooting tub, he considered it, unconsciously rubbing the territory he supposed must either border on or encompass his inadequate and hitherto unsuspected pit region with the back of one good hand.

It had been said with good humour, enthusiasm, even, as if his ignorance might in itself constitute a quality that, if not exactly desirable, could at least be considered endearing.

Just before he stopped listening, Mia had used an Afrikaans word to describe him. 'The thing is, he's so *flipping*', she had said, followed by an unintelligible three-syllable adjective which he

immediately repeated it five times and then wrote down, with Welsh phonemes to handle the guttural.

'Who was on the phone earlier?' he had asked when she came into the bathroom with a fresh kettle of boiling water. 'Cassie,' Mia had said, confirming his guess. He knew only that Mia had known Cassie at Stellenbosch, and that she was coming to London soon, and that he was expected to make her feel welcome.

'And what does Cassie say?'

Mia had smiled. 'She said you mustn't let me give you any of my crap.'

A shout went up from the screens and about half the patrons. The All Blacks were running out. Both of them turned briefly towards the screen, then back to each other.

'How did you know it was me?' said Cassie.

'I recognised your eyes.' He explained in his soft, chunky voice about the photo on Mia's kitchen wall, about the eyes in the back of her head, how he had assumed until now that Mia had altered the colouring.

He bought her a drink, apologised for Mia being late, adopted responsibility for her bag, her coat, her comfort. Cassie laughed and told him to sit down.

A few minutes later they heard the pub door squealing on its hinges, and Cassie resisted the urge to turn her neck yet again, until a familiar exultant baying caught her attention, and that of everyone sitting near the door. Cassie saw a succession of eyebrows turn with frowning alarm towards the noise, and then leap up several rungs when their owners caught sight of its source.

Cassie, too, was taken aback. When she had arrived the day before, Mia had looked more or less exactly the same as ever. The same old blue bandanna she had always worn to keep her hair out of her face, the same old pair of faded cargo pants she had loved to death throughout university. Cassie had thought Mia looked well and happy, but only now could she see the extent to which her friend had come into her own. She was wearing a knee-length jacket of oxblood leather, tailored hound's-tooth pants and red snakeskin boots, and had a cell-phone to her ear. There was a gleam to her kohl-rimmed eyes as she recommenced baying into it, and the light caught the coppery streaks in the sheaves of dark hair that hung loose about her shoulders.

'O, *hierso's hulle... okay... sien jou nou nou...bye.*' She ended the call and smiled. '*Hello daar*, I mean, hello there, so you two have found each other.' She caught Cassie's expression. '... What?' she said.

'Nothing. You look good. I like your jacket.'

'Thanks. It cost me a fortnight of double shifts and baked beans on toast. Helena's on her way.' She kissed Matt on the eye. 'What did you get up to today?' she said to Cassie.

'I went to the Natural History Museum,' said Cassie.

'How was it?'

'Same old, same old,' said Cassie, smiling.

Mia grinned, shrugging off her jacket. She slung it over the back of a chair and lit a cigarette, dismissing with a gesture a disapproving look from Matt. Cassie found the sequence of movements repeated in her mind's eye. There was something in that physical haiku that confirmed it for her, more than the clothes or even the hint of an Estuary accent that clung to her like lint after her day's work in the city. Mia had changed.

'Sorry I'm late,' said Helena, joining them at the table in a fluster of garments and bags. 'The cook was off sick today, so I had to fix Mr. Davenport his tea.' Helena was working full-time as a nurse for the paraplegic Mr. Davenport.

'She also had to convince him it wasn't horse flesh,' said Mia.

Helena seated herself. 'I could use a drink. Hello, Cassie, you look a little more rested today. Did you sleep well?'

'Yes, thanks.' She considered it a public service to say this. It was by far her most common white lie, and it was hardly even that much, as the question, much like 'howzit,' was really an end in itself.

They ordered drinks and finger-foods from what Cassie thought was a surprisingly cosmopolitan bill of fare for a pub, and presently set to on a platter of hummus, couscous, goat's cheese and grilled vegetables. South Africa scored a tri and failed to convert it.

'How long are you in London for, Cassie?' Matt asked.

As long as it takes, was her first thought. 'I'm not sure yet,' she said. 'I have a year. But I'll be going up to Edinburgh in a few days for Christmas.'

'You have some family there, I understand?'

'That's right. My father and stepmother, and her son.'

'I remember your step-brother,' said Mia with her mouth full. 'What's he up to these days?'

'How could you possibly remember him?'

'I met him. I'm sure I did. Didn't he have those splendid teeth?'

'I don't know,' said Cassie. 'I hadn't noticed.'

'What was his name again?'

'Justin.'

'That's right. Like the rat.'

The moment she said it, Cassie remembered that Mia had, in fact, met Justin, in her first year, when the Harris family Version II had taken her out for a farewell lunch in Stellenbosch before heading back to the UK. Her father had said she should bring her friends along. Cassie had brought Mia. Mia had talked about a rat then too.

'Which rat is this?' said Matt.

'Mia had a pet rat called Justin when she was a child,' said Helena.

What was Justin up to these days? thought Cassie. He had dropped out from a maths degree, and as far as she could remember he had travelled afterwards – there had been some mishap in Thailand, or Singapore, one of those destinations-of-the-month; a brush with the authorities – but he had gone back to Edinburgh University to do something else. Something to do with business, she was almost sure.

'Justin is no name for a rat,' said Matt.

'Justin is the *only* name for a rat,' said Mia.

'He was named after the main good-guy rat from *Secret of NIMH*,' said Helena. 'Mia was in love with him. The one from the movie, that is, not her pet.'

'I was not in love with him.'

'Now, this part I haven't heard,' said Cassie, tuning in again.

'That's because it's rubbish,' said Mia.

'You had pictures of him in your diary,' said Helena. 'With little hearts.'

'You read my diary?' said Mia.

'I'm competing with a rat?' said Matt.

'He was a most gallant rat,' said Helena.

'I was *not* in love with him. What were you doing reading my diary?'

'I was twelve, Mia.'

It was at this point that Mia, in self-defence, had gone on to say that at least she didn't have a thing for a car. As Helena admitted quite openly to harbouring a courtly love for Kitt from *Knightrider*, Mia went on to argue that this passion was the result of psychological displacement to cover for transgressing the much weightier taboo of having had a crush on David Hasselhoff, a charge which Helena hotly denied.

Matt caught Cassie looking at him and smiled wryly, with a flick of the eye towards the sisters. She smiled back, and wondered why this three second exchange of silent communication left her feeling as if they had just had a lengthy heart-to-heart.

'What kind of job are you interested in getting, Cassie?' he said loudly.

'Oh, anything, really,' said Cassie, mimicking his exaggerated volume. 'I'd like to see if I can get something in line with my field, even if it's grunt work.'

'What is your field, exactly?'

'I studied philosophy,' said Cassie.

'Ah,' said Matt. There was the usual uncertain pause, which to Cassie's ear always sounded like it was about to be followed by a few words of commiseration. 'So, you're looking for...?'

'Ideally, something to do with words.'

'Well, with an objective that vague you can hardly fail, eh?' said Mia, spooning baba ghanoush onto a pita. 'Did you get hold of a TNT?'

'I did. I looked through it on the tube.'

'And?'

'I saw something offering temp positions, but it didn't say where or even what.'

'Hmm,' said Mia. 'In all likelihood that's a recruitment agency masquerading. But you might as well go that route to start with.'

'You could do care work like me, but it might take a while to organise,' said Helena.

'I'm not sure that's really my bag,' said Cassie.

'It's good money.'

'You should also look on Gumtree,' said Mia.

'What's all this pressure for?' said Matt. 'She's just arrived, she should have some fun before she starts slogging. We should take you out on the town, Cassie.'

'That's a good idea,' said Mia. 'What do you say Cass? How long has it been since you had a real night out?'

'Um,' said Cassie, pretending to cast her mind back, and knowing full well that she hadn't had anything approaching a night out since she had last seen Mia.

'Think you remember how to shake your groove thang?' said Helena.

'Of course she does. It's like riding a bicycle,' said Matt.

Their eyes met again. Every aspect of him drew from her a single instinctive response: *safe*. Which was odd in itself, Cassie thought. Mia had always had a penchant for men who provoked quite the opposite reaction.

Either way, thought Cassie, she appeared to be doing very well on it. More than well. In point of fact, Cassie had never seen her looking so ravishing. Judging from his expression, Matt seemed to think so too. His was the face of a kid who, having hoped for a model airplane at Christmas, had been presented instead with a functional F15. More than once during the course of the meal thus far she had caught him gazing at Mia as if he had yet to figure out exactly what she was doing sitting next to him with her hand on his thigh.

As the evening progressed, Cassie decided that she liked him immensely, noting with approval the self-effacing way he talked about his work and the care he took to make sure the ladies' wine glasses were never empty.

'He's nice,' she said to Mia later, when he had seen them onto their tube.

'He is, isn't he,' said Mia.

'It surprises me.'

'It surprises you that he's nice?'

'You don't usually go for the nice ones.'

Watching them from across the table; seeing Mia so visibly free of the past, so *present*, she had felt for the first time the slight prod of a sorrow that was not directly connected with Sam himself, but rather with a lapsed state of being. She had found herself possessed of a wistfulness, and something more. The gentlest kind of envy. She labelled it and shelved it for later destruction. It had no business being there.

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He was not as big as his father, Sam, but he was not small either. Eighty-six kilograms. She knew that was what he weighed and she held the fact in her head now like a talisman. She tried not to think of the other fact that was attached to the task before her: *A dead weight*.

She pulled the car up beside him, as close as she dared, knowing that this was the distance she would have to conquer in a few moments with that weight in her arms.

She got out of the car, leaving the engine running and the headlights on.

Kneeling beside him, she checked again for his pulse, shocked by the coldness of his skin. It took her ten seconds to locate the fluttering in his neck.

Okay, Sam, she said, and, placing one hand under each armpit, she pulled.

A fresh flow of blood immediately emerged from his head, and she wanted to tear out her eyes. Idiot, idiot, Idiot! You don't have to have taken a first aid course to know the one thing that anyone who has ever seen an action movie knows: put pressure on the wound to stop the bleeding!

It was hard to put pressure on a wound made in bone. She tried to stem the flow with the towel. There was a clear fluid coming out of the wound now too, she saw, and out of his ears, and it frightened her. Somehow the blood was better; it was not where it belonged, inside him, but at least it was rich and hot and full of life. This clear fluid had a finality about it; the insipid consistency of defeat.

She looked around her again, trying to decide whether she would risk, at last, calling Mia's name. Instinct warned her not to betray her presence, but rationally she knew that the car would have done that already.

'Mia?' she said experimentally. *MIA!* She called at the top of her lungs. Only the trees responded.

'*HELP!*' She called, and then shut her mouth abruptly. Hearing her voice screaming for help had almost made her panic. She took a deep breath, and tried again. It had to be said. She had to try. *Somebody, help me!*

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Sam's absence was everywhere in London, behind every homecoming, every move she made. It became clear only once Mia went back to work and Cassie began to set in motion the mechanics of a making a year's worth of life for herself. In South Africa he was missing from places, but there he was



missing from processes. It was not like Stellenbosch or even Cape Town where he had occupied space, exercised his will on the environment, where there were things that he had touched, made, people who knew what it meant to say his name. Here the memories were acts of fancy, thought experiments, projected into this half-remembered city two years earlier by her loving, scheming mind. Pre-emptive memories. In the tube his face was supposed to be across from hers, his shoulder was supposed to be beside and five inches above hers when she stood in queues. Every ticket she bought was supposed to be two tickets. Every application form. Every classified she circled.

She had a dream which she remembered and wrote down. She was in a shop, a clothing store, looking at items and putting them back on the rack. The customers kept asking her questions, and she kept having to explain that she didn't work there.

It was, she thought, like her mother's habit of saying 'I'm not here, I'm not here,' when she was in a rush and running in and out of the house quickly to pick something up: her way of indicating that she wouldn't be there for very long, was supposed to be somewhere else, that one shouldn't attempt to engage her in any way.

Her mother had been right, Cassie thought. It was a fool's errand. She was a misguided missile, following an abandoned flight path. She should never have come. She should leave London. She should go to Edinburgh and have Christmas with her family and then go back home to South Africa as it had been planned originally. Or she should at least go to Edinburgh, and see from there.

I've come all this way, thought Cassie, not thinking in terms of distance. I have a year.

'Miss Harris?'

Cassie looked up. 'Yes?'

'You can go in now.'

'Thank you.' She rose from the waiting room chair.

Following Mia's advice, Cassie had phoned the number in the TNT, and, discovering that it did indeed belong to a recruitment agency, she had made an appointment with a Mr. Twycross. The latter, a portly man with bouffant hair and a tie decorated in what appeared to be a Thomas the Tank Engine motif, spent the first ten minutes of their appointment riffling through the gravity-defying stacks of hardcopy before him in an attempt to unearth the CV she had sent ahead, and proceeded to collapse in his chair, exhausted by the effort. He cleared his throat six times.

'So, Cassiopeia. Interesting name.' He made the usual mistake, putting the emphasis on the third syllable instead of the fourth.

'Thank you,' said Cassie.

'Let's see, let's see. South Africa, yeh? How's your English?'

'It's my first language.'

'Goody gumdrops. Now then, we have an accidental insurance company looking for telesales personnel. Could you read these lines out loud for me?'

He handed her a piece of paper. *Good MORNING/AFTERNOON, Sir/Madam!* She read, scanning the page. *How are you today?* PAUSE. *Sir/Madam, my name is (NAME), and I would like to ask you a very important QUESTION.* She cleared her throat. 'Good morning, ah, Sir,' she read aloud. 'How are you today? Sir, my name is Cassie -'

'Um,' said Mr. Twycross. Cassie looked up. 'Can you try and sound more...' he made large oar-like movements with his hands, which were presumably intended to denote enthusiasm. Cassie cleared her throat. 'Sir, my name is *Cassie*, and I would like to ask you a very important *question!* None of us likes to think about all the things that could go wrong in our lives -'

'Ah, yeh,' said Mr. Twycross. 'Make it a bit more...' - he wiggled his shoulders - 'sexy, like.'

'Well, wouldn't it be nice if someone else was thinking about them *for you?*' read Cassie, endeavouring to make her voice both enthusiastic and sexy, and sounding to her own ears like a cross between Jessica Rabbit and her husband.

'Hm.' Said Mr. Twycross. 'Okay, that'll do. Maybe not telesales for you, eh? Right then. Right, right right... let me think. You have such unusual looks, I wonder...'

'Yes?'

'I might have some promo work for you. Will you hop up for me quickly?'

Cassie stood up uncertainly. Mr. Twycross swilled his finger around, and Cassie did a turn, feeling absurd.

'Not bad, not bad at all.'

'What kind of promotion is this?' asked Cassie.

'Tequila. It's easy-peasy, you just have to offer free shooters to clubbers. Night shifts only, of course, and the job won't last long, but the pay's good. How do you feel about spandex?'

'Don't you have anything that's actually in line with my qualifications?' asked Cassie, sitting down quickly.

Mr. Twycross peered at her CV again, holding one page in either hand and looking between them as if trying to choose one. 'Yeeeahh, the philosopher market is a little flooded at present,' he said. A reed instrument-sound emerged from his nose which Cassie surmised to be suppressed laughter.

'Your problem is you don't have any experience, see?'

'I do,' she said, wagging a hand at the pages. 'I have references...'

'Any *London* experience, Miss Harris.'

'Oh.'

'So.'

'Let me try this phone thing again. I'm sure I just needed a practice run.'

'Tell you what. There's something opening up in three weeks you might fancy. A temp position at a travel magazine.'

'Oh?'

'They want data-capturers. Tracking their subscriber's details and so forth.'

'Oh.'

'So shall I send them your stuff?' He tapped her CV. 'You never know, once you've got your foot in the door, you might be able to move up into something more to your taste.'

'Thank you. That sounds good.'

'I'll keep an eye out for anything else that comes along, eh? In the meantime, if you're really not keen on this promo gig...'

'I don't think so, no.'

'Then you might want to get yourself a waitressing job or something to tide you over.'

'Who would hire me for three weeks?'

'Well it might turn out to be longer, mightn't it. And if not... well, what they don't know can't hurt you, right?' He winked. 'Tell 'em you're available indefinitely.'

'I don't think I could do that.'

'You'd better learn quick. This town helps those who help themselves. All right then, Miss Harris. We'll be giving you a call shortly.'

A waitressing job or something to tide her over, thought Cassie as she left Mr. Twycross's office. Data-capturing. Vulnerable as well as available indefinitely.

She had a year.

She would go to Edinburgh as soon as possible, and while she was there she would decide, once and for all, what she intended to do with it.

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Had Bach been born in the 20<sup>th</sup> century he would have been a jazz cat, so said Sam Loudon. Bach was the greatest improviser of his time.

*Listen to the way his left hand tells a different story to the one his right hand is telling. Listen to the way they contradict each other. It's like rubbing your stomach while patting your head for the soul.*

Sam Loudon always had a simile to hand.

*That's his genius, to hold black and white together. You know who did that next?*

Cassie thought she could guess.

*Art Tatum did that next*, said Sam.

If you got to ask what it is, you never get to find out, said Louis Armstrong.

Johann Sebastian Bach would not have had to ask.

Hear him down in Jackson Square, dropping half-beats everywhere. See him there on Bourbon Street, JSB, Bach prowling between sequinned divas in a dingy hot moody blue paradise, high on catfish jambalaya and Sazeracs.

Sam always wanted to go there. But Sam was gone now, and so, for that matter, was New Orleans. The mountain had gone to Mohammed.

Cassie had wanted them to play *Tiger Rag* at his funeral. Not Bach's funeral, Sam's. To her it was self-evidently the most important element of the whole occasion, the music, getting it right. It was a tall order: Sam was not fond of the organ – no subtlety, he said, no *piano y forte*, no light and shade.

'What about Fats Waller?' said Cassie. 'and Basie?'

'I wasn't talking about jazz,' said Sam.

Outside of jazz, then, Sam made an exception for Bach, and another for Ray Manzarek, who made up for the lack of light and shade with the brashness of his colours, who let out that holier-than-thou instrument's wild side, got it drunk and made it dance on tables, seduced it. With the organ, too much is too much, but way too much is just right, said Sam.

Dianne Loudon put her foot down.

'You can't play The Doors at a funeral,' she said. 'You just can't.'

'I wasn't suggesting that. I meant we should play Fats Waller,' said Cassie.

'We are not playing jazz.'

'There's some very sombre jazz.'

'We're not playing jazz.'

'Then play Bach.'

They played Bach. Air on a G String. The organist did a good job with it, Cassie thought. He was a masters student, a year ahead of them, a man for whose timing Sam had once, in passing, expressed admiration.

The organist didn't have it.

She saw Alzette, Sam's high school girlfriend; her only predecessor worthy of mention. Alzette had it. Cassie was surprised.

There were those marked as she was marked; turned inside out, their innermost selves bear to the elements, stripped of everything that holds the core in place and shields it. And there were those who were not thus marked.

Felix Baum had it. Felix outdid them all, incandescent in his grief, his soul haemorrhaging forth through his eyes and mouth, the only authentic-seeming thing amongst the inappropriately ordinary phenomena – hats, cups, the sound of one spoon tapping – that cluttered the rest of the afternoon. People sat up when he took to the podium. Those who knew Sam only distantly were awed and envious, to be in the presence of a man who mourned so ferociously and, it followed, loved so well. Who would inveigh against the gods like this at *their* funerals? They wondered in Cassie's head. Who would take up arms against a hurricane, and win?

They were moved, all of them – shaken – as Felix spoke Sam to life and then killed him again. All but Cassie. She had been terrified.

Here in Camden, Cassie was the only stationary audience to the busking quartet who were playing the string version of Bach's Air on a G String. When they finished she stood for some time, until the Kurt Cobain look-alike who slouched around his instrument as if it were a Fender Strat instead of a violin gave her a smile which seemed more pitying than pitiable. He would have to work on that.

'All right, love?' he said in Scouse.

She raised an eyebrow at him.

'You look sort of freaked out.'

'It's my resting face.'

She had not moved since they stopped playing. She had been waiting, she supposed, for more Bach; the soundtrack to the next emotion. What had come next that day, that other day, she could not at present remember. The playback of her memory had stopped when the music did.

The violinist nodded, and then his eyes dropped to her hands. 'You've got good taste.' He smiled.

Cassie frowned, uncomprehending, then followed his gaze down to the object she held. 'Shit,' she said, starting.

Cassie looked around for Mia, who she was sure would have stopped too, if only because she, Cassie, had stopped. But Mia was gone. Cassie was alone.

She ducked down one of the temporary alleyways created by the facing tents and stalls of peripatetic traders. It was the only way Mia could have gone which would account for so sudden a disappearance. Behind her, the string quartet struck up *Bohemian Rhapsody*.

Before the string quartet had taken control of her feet, Cassie had been following the jacket, doggedly keeping this beacon in sight as she rode the Saturday throngs through the noisome warren of Camden Lock, where they had come that day to spend some time together before Cassie left for Edinburgh.

Before they were separated, she and Mia had been in a small second-hand record store. Mia had browsed the CD racks looking for the new Muse album, and Cassie had wandered over to the vinyl racks. From there she had wandered over to the jazz section, and in the jazz section she had wandered over to the T's. This was where she found a vinyl copy of *Art Tatum at Shrine Auditorium*.

What's that you've got?' Mia had said, as Cassie went on browsing, with the record clutched to her chest, like a preppie with a textbook.

'It's *Art Tatum at Shrine Auditorium*,' said Cassie.

Mia had asked to look at the record. Cassie had put the record in Mia's hands. 'Hmmm,' said Mia. She turned it over and looked at the other side. 'Whatever happened to all those records of Sam's, do you think? Did they take them to California?'

'I have them,' said Cassie.

'Really?'

'Ja.'

'All of them?'

'Yep.'

They browsed further down the rack, neither taking in the titles.

'How did that happen?' said Mia.

'Just before the Loudons left that time, I went to get all my stuff out of the Jonkershoek house, and they were still there, obviously, and nobody really wanted them except me.'

'Oh, right.'

'That's the only one he didn't have,' said Cassie. Mia still had it in her hand.

'Now it's the only one you don't have,' said Mia. She had held it out for Cassie to take. Cassie had taken it.

'Shrooms?'

The voice belonged to an androgynous life-form with blue hair and a face of startling beauty, wearing what appeared to be pyjamas.

'No.' She could still not see Mia. Moving against the crowd down a street redolent of urine, chow mein and cloves, Cassie scanned between the ink- and metal-augmented faces for a hint of ox-blood.

She had made her way back to a proper commercial street now, and she walked with the one-leg-jogging, one-leg-lagging pace of someone in a hurry to get somewhere but unsure how to get there, wondering whether the familiarity of the melange of sitar music, trip-hop and acid jazz spilling from the tenebrous storefronts meant that she had come this way before.

'Mia!' She thought she had caught a flash of dark red disappearing into a doorway a little farther down. She pushed forward, jostling and being jostled until she reached the entrance, where she found herself corralled behind a trenchcoated wall. 'Excuse me, can I get by,' she said, tapping the wall as near to the shoulder-area as she could reach. The figure turned. Twin horns of hair spiralled up improbably from an otherwise bald head. Cassie started. His eyes were a livid yellow, and crossing their centres horizontally were the lozenge-shaped pupils of a goat.

'I beg your pardon, Signora,' he said graciously. Contacts, thought Cassie, as he squeezed his monument of a body to one side to allow her through. She entered the shop, her eyes roving amongst the racks of silk kimonos and patent leather and the display cases brimming with post-humanist accessories. 'Did you see a girl...' she murmured to the goat-eyed gentleman, but then Mia appeared, bobbing in the doorway behind him.

'Where did you go?' said Mia.

'I lost you.'

Mia looked down at Cassie's hands. 'So you bought that record?'

'No,' Cassie said. 'I stole it. We have to go back.'

Cassie had honestly intended to return it to the shelf. But Mia had walked out so abruptly that Cassie had been afraid of losing her in the crowd. In her distraction she had not noticed that she was still holding it. Neither had the clerk.

Together they returned to the record store, and Cassie, shamefaced, explained what had happened, to a man who exchanged a sceptical glance with Mia and said nothing. Then they left for Tooting.

They were going out that night, to take Cassie out on the town before she left, to have some fun.

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In malls and supermarkets across Cape Town when Cassie was growing up, there had been an ever-present fibreglass statue of a blonde girl with braces on her legs and a coin slot in her head and a sign inviting you to donate to the polio fund. Around the time she was fifteen, she had seen the one at her local Pick 'n Pay being loaded into a moving truck, and, peering curiously inside, she had seen a row of them there on the truck bed, glaring out at her with their stoic cornflower eyes like the Village of the Crippled Damned. They were back on the beat a while later with their signs changed: Please Help Us Fight Cerebral Palsy. It was progress, after a fashion. Ring in the new.

The towel kept falling off whenever she tried to move him. It was the hole in the top of his blond head, the exit wound, that had made her think of the polio girl with her coin slot.

She had never liked that polio girl much. When her mother gave her change she preferred putting it in the SANCCOB seal, or the SPCA statue if there was one, doling out the change with scrupulous fairness between the big dog, the little dog and the cat, like a benevolent maiden aunt.

She hoisted and he didn't move. She hoisted again. He had never felt this heavy on top of her, even when he would breathe all his air out and pretend to have fallen asleep. And again. Every time one small part of her gave up, all the other parts would gang up on it and tear it to pieces. This happened over and over until she thought there could hardly be anything left of her, but what was left was strong and brutal and stubborn as all get-out. Survival of the fittest. Okay, time for a break. Smoke if you got 'em.

It was only once she had him propped up against the rear left tyre, and she paused to pant for twenty seconds and noticed a silence around her that seemed somehow new-minted, that she realised there was a song stuck in her head – the theme tune from Gummi Bears – and that she had been whistling it for the last who knows how long.

Cassie was not, by habit, a whistler.

Where was Mia?

There was a language they had someplace, the Basque region or the Canary Islands, someplace, that was made up entirely of whistles. Shepherds used it to communicate over long distances. She wondered how one whistled 'where the fuck are you' in Whistle Language, realised anyone listening would be far more likely to understand Gummi Bears, and decided to come back to what she knew.

She had his head lolling into the foot-space, one shoulder and one arm on the back seat. She heaved and he slumped, his cheek hitting the inside hinge of the open door hard enough to draw blood, and stupidly she apologised and wiped away the trickle from this tiny scrape while from the wound in his head a lusty slippery slick oozed afresh.

She went round to the other side of the car, opened the door, knelt on the seat, and pulled. He shifted a couple of inches at each tug, and in this way she succeeded in getting him inside the car up to his knee joints. Then she went back round to the left. What she had to do now was get him sitting upright.



It would have been easier if he was wearing a shirt or something else she could get a grip on, but all she had was his arms, so she used those.

Bouncing here and there and everywhere. It took two choruses and the only verse she knew but she got him up against the seat, and when she did his eyes opened and he looked at her and she gasped. Then his eyes went vague again and his head lolled.

She said his name but nothing happened. Never mind. Almost there.

One leg in. It was easier than she had expected, the legs. Other leg in. Boyfriend in the car. Yes, still breathing. Cassie slammed the door.

The time, she noted on the dashboard clock, was nine-twenty-five p.m. It had taken her the better part of the hour to get him in the car. It would take her only another five minutes or so to get down to the gym, another five between the gym and the mediclinic. Perhaps another fifteen to get him into theatre. For the sake of her sanity, Cassie pretended these numbers would make a difference.

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Cassie sat on the sleeper couch with the entire contents of her backpack and suitcase spread out around her. Solid, comfortable clothes, packed with a Northern winter in mind: jeans and jerseys, vests, and two pairs of what her mother called 'sensible' shoes. It was hopeless. Mia walked in wearing an azure scarf-top and hipsters. 'What have you found?' she asked.

'Well, I have this skirt,' she answered. 'But not much else.'

'Let's find you something to go with it,' said Mia, turning for the stairs.

'That's insane, Mee, you're half my size.'

'Not my clothes, Helena's. She won't mind. What size are your feet?'

'Seven'

'That's five in UK sizes, I think her shoes should fit you.'

Cassie had been reluctant at first about the night out, which had now turned into a farewell party. But once she started putting on make-up and jewellery and perfume, she found herself caught up in the little rite, at once novel and familiar. 'I remember doing this when I was fifteen,' she said to Mia.

'Me, too. Trying to look the age I am now.'

'Except that you still look like you're fifteen.'

She had let Mia do her eyes for her the way she had done her own. Three layers of mascara and eyeliner all the way around. Ice-white on the lids.

Mia emerged from Helena's room holding up her sister's prized suede stiletto boots.

'I can't walk in those,' said Cassie.

'Try.'

Cassie put on the boots. They were a little tight around the toes, but they fit. Standing up, she teetered for a moment, feeling as if she had rocketed up not inches, but feet, in height. Mia, already a head and a half shorter than she was, and still barefoot, seemed now to be an altogether different, smaller-scale subspecies of human being from her point of view. 'I feel like I'm on stilts,' she said.

'You look good.'

'So who's coming tonight?' asked Cassie, trying a few experimental steps around the bedroom. 'Is it just the three of us?'

'Matt's bringing his flatmate.'

They met Matt and his friend, Davy, (whom Mia had described as 'relatively benign') for drinks in Shepherd's Bush.

The only seats available were at the bar, and Cassie ended up seated next to Davy.

He was the well-groomed, metrosexual type, with a monobrow and daring sideburns.

'So Carrie,' he said, turning to her.

'Cassie.'

'Cassie. What are you -' he stopped and his eyebrow shot up in surprise.

'Crikey,' he said. 'It's not just the light, is it?' You've got one brown eye and one blue eye.'

Really? How extraordinary. I'd never noticed. 'Yes,' she said aloud, smiling pleasantly.

'Is it genetic?'

'My father's mother had it too.'

'I suppose people comment on it a lot?'

Only the extremely unimaginative. 'Sometimes.'

'Are you sensitive about it?'

'I can be, if people go on and on about it,' she said, smiling a little pointedly.

'Yeh, I suppose that could get a bit much. So, which do you prefer?'

The one people talk about least often. 'Oh, I don't have a favourite.'

'Would you rather have matching eyes?'

I'm beginning to now. 'No I'm kind of accustomed to looking this way.'

'Ha, ha. *Looking* this way.'

'Ha, ha.'

'Well...' he lowered his head slightly so that he could glance up at her beguilingly from underneath his poisonous-caterpillar brows. 'I think the effect is entrancing.'

'You are too kind.'

'Can I get you another drink?'

'Oh, not quite yet.'

'Oh, go on.'

'I'm pacing myself.'

He bought her one anyway, and she drank it. She discovered that Davy was a marketing consultant, a motorcycle aficionado, and that he knew Matt through an ex-girlfriend. He seemed to enjoy talking and she allowed him to do as much of it as he pleased. Cassie thought 'benign' was an excellent word for Davy: it described a lump that, while annoying, can be safely ignored.

Her second beer was going down well. It had been a while since she had drunk more than a single glass of a wine at a sitting, and already there was a soothing lack of precision to her thoughts. By the time they moved on to the club Mia had picked out, she was barely aware of the cold.

Inside it was hot and loud. House music boomed out of the monolithic speakers.

'Do you feel like dancing?' shouted Mia.

'What?' said Cassie.

'I said, do you feel like dancing?'

'S'what we're here for, isn't it?'

They moved onto the dance floor. Cassie allowed her limbs to respond to the pound of the latest conveyor belt tunes the DJ was mixing. She watched the laser lights play over Mia's body. Matt was studying her sidelong like someone cribbing on an exam, and following gamely enough with the generic joint twitches native to his ilk.

'Where's Davy?' Cassie asked Mia.

'What?'

'Where's Davy gone?'

Mia nodded her head to the area behind Cassie. Turning around, Cassie found herself staring at Davy's crotch. He was on the platform behind her, pelvis athrust. 'Come on up,' he shouted. She smiled and pretended not to have heard him, but he gestured extravagantly, beckoning her onto the stage. Reluctantly she took his outstretched hand and stepped up beside him. He seized her other arm and tried to coerce her into some sort of two-step.

'*I can't waaaait for the weekend to begiiiiin*' he sang, aiming the words winningly at her face, while she began extricating herself from him as if he were too small a coat.

'I need to sit down,' she said.

'What?'

'I need to sit down.'

'What's wrong?'

'My feet hurt. These aren't my shoes.'

'Oh, right. Well, let me come with you. I'll get you a drink.'

'What?'

'I'll get you a *drink*!'

'I'll be fine, you go ahead and dance.'

'It's no problem.'

She allowed herself to be guided down to the end of the stage and into the bar area. There were no stools available, so she sat on the window-sill while Davy went to fetch her some water.

Cassie was relieved to be out of the press of sweaty bodies. Her feet really were hurting and she was feeling a little light-headed. Davy returned presently holding two glasses.

'Thanks,' said Cassie, taking the one she had handed to him. She took a large gulp, and made a face. 'This isn't water,' she said.

'You're right, it's not,' said Davy, giggling. 'Look.' He took her glass again and held it under the UV light set into the corner. The contents glowed toxically.

'What is it?' said Cassie.

'Vodka tonic. It's the quinine that makes it glow.'

'How about that.' She swapped glasses with Davy.

'You don't like dancing much?' he said.

'It's not really my kind of music.'

'There are other rooms,' he said. 'Drum and bass down the passage, trance upstairs.'

'I think I'll just sit for a minute.'

'No problem.' He leaned up against the wall, bopping his head a little and surveying the crowd at the bar. 'Packed tonight, yeh?'

'Yep,' said Cassie. She was beginning to feel nauseous. She imagined the vodka tonic illuminating her insides like a phosphorescent cave. 'Can you tell me where the toilets are?' she asked.

'I'll show you.'

She followed him down a few steps and into the passageway that led to the drum and bass room. It was darker and stuffier here, the transition in musical genre and concomitant sub-culture registered otherwise by an increase of the bass reverberation in her solar plexus, and a distantly post-coital scent issuing, it would seem, from the carpet. A strobe revealed epileptic flashes of the dancers inside. 'Over there,' said Davy. 'To the left.'

'Thanks.'

'Hang on a moment.' He had taken hold of her wrist again.

'What is it?'

'Tell me,' he said, 'Why do you look so sad?'

He locked her in an Enrique Iglesias glower which she could only hope was intended to be tongue in cheek. 'It's my resting face,' she said.

'You should smile more.'

'Okay. Can I go to the bathroom first?'

He laughed a little man-eating tiger laugh, and, to her dawning horror, leaned in towards her. The strobe illuminated stark stop-motion stills of his approaching face, his oddly blanked-out eyes. She turned her head aside just too late to avoid his mouth sliding over her own. Jerking away, she backed up against the wall, the arm he had gripped raised defensively.

'What's the matter?' said Davy, his eyebrow denting in the middle. 'I thought...'

'What did you think? And what the hell made you think it?'

'Calm down, Carrie.'

'My name is not Carrie!'

'Look, I'm sorry,' he muttered irritably. 'Why are you Saffers always so bloody uptight? I just thought, you know... Matt said...'

'What did Matt say?'

He shrugged. 'Matt said that you were looking for a good time.'

Cassie laughed, then stopped. Suddenly she knew beyond all doubt that she was going to throw up. She turned for the toilets, finding an empty stall just as her stomach heaved over and expelled its contents. Her throat burned. She tried to clear her mouth with tap-water, but it tasted foul and milky and she spat it out. She splashed her face instead and waited for her head to clear, staring at her pale reflection in the mirror that ran the length of the wall over the row of basins. The water had caused her makeup to run, and grainy black stains were setting under her eyes. She wiped at them with the heels of her hands.

*I think the effect is entrancing.*

Oh, Sam.

A moment later Mia entered, announced by a brief blast of music from the room beyond.

'There you are,' she said. 'Where have you been? Where's Davy?'

'I don't know.'

'Is something the matter?'

'What did you tell Matt?'

'Tell him? About what?'

'Davy just... made a pass at me. Apparently Matt told him I was "looking for a good time."' She nearly laughed again.

'Oh... oh no.'

'Why would he have said that, do you think?'

'There's been a misunderstanding. All I said to Matt was, it would be *nice* if you *had* a good time. If you got out a bit, met some... people... and he said he'd try and help. That's all.'

'People. You mean men.'

'Is that so terrible?'

'Not you too, Mia. I thought you understood.'

'What do you mean, 'me too?''

'Trying to get me to *Move On*.'

They faced each other wordlessly. Cassie looked at Mia, the long green eyes, the pupils with their habit of moving between one's eyes, constantly, when she listened to what one was saying, instead of settling on one, and felt herself growing suddenly very tired.

The door opened again, admitting another jangle of drum and bass before it swung shut behind two overblonde, overtanned girls in spaghetti-string tops and mini-skirts, talking loudly about the really fit bloke that Tina had just snogged. They disappeared into adjacent stalls, continuing their conversation through the partition. Aw, mingen, said one of them. Someone's chundered in here.

Mia sighed. 'Cassie, what are you doing here?'

'I needed to use the toilet.'

'No. Here. In London. Why did you come? Why did you leave Cape Town? If not to get a fresh start, to begin living again? Is that not the general idea?'

'Partly, yes,' Cassie answered carefully.

'Then is everyone who tries to support you in that to be condemned?'

'Inviting some Jude Law wannabe to take pity on me is not my idea of support.'

'I've explained that it wasn't like that.'

'Yes. Well. Just so we're clear, I'm not your pet project.'

'And I'm not your enemy.'

The two blondes emerged again and clip-clopped over to the basins to refresh their lip gloss. 'Don't suppose you have some gum, love?' one of them asked Cassie. She shook her head.

'Look,' said Mia. 'I'm sorry. It was all a mistake. Do you want to go home?'

'We don't have to, if you're enjoying yourselves,' Cassie said.

'We came here for you.'

'I know,' said Cassie. 'I'm sorry.' She was. That their efforts had gone to waste; that they would part on this note.

'Never mind,' said Mia. 'Let's find Matt and get out of here.'

On the way home to Tooting in Matt's Volvo, they narrowly avoided hitting a bedraggled urban fox, which scampered through the glare of the headlights with pitiful gracelessness on its three remaining legs. That poor specimen won't last long, said Matt.

*Wearily a lame shadow lags by stump and in hollow*, Cassie mouthed as the creature stumbled into the darkness. Her own thought fox, custom-made. The first swells of a migraine were booming in her ears.

'Thank you both for the wonderful evening,' she said when they arrived at the flat.

'You enjoyed yourself, did you?' said Matt, looking genuinely pleased.

'Oh, very much.' She was relieved; it seemed Davy had not said anything to him before they departed. She hoped Mia wouldn't either.

'Are you all right?' said Matt, frowning. 'You look a bit woozy.'

'I need to lie down.... Right now. I get these headaches.'

'Oh dear,' said Mia. 'Anything I can get you? Aspirin?'

'I have some stuff for it. I'll be fine.' She was walking backwards as she spoke, her feet propelling her towards darkness and silence. The swells were becoming breakers.

'Well, okay,' said Mia. 'Just shout if you need something.'

The mere mention of shouting made her teeth sing. She endured Mia and Matt's exaggeratedly quiet movements as they went about preparing for bed. Lying awake on the sleeper couch in the living-room with a pillow over her head, an aircraft coasting in her ears and a codeine buzz in her skin, Cassie listened to the sounds of their lovemaking through the ceiling and thought about Sam's hands, about the wetness of Davy's lips.

It was December the 11<sup>th</sup>.

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When she reached the tar road she dialled again, and this time the police answered. She was halfway into the description of where she was and what had happened when she realised that there was no way now that the police, or any other keeper of flashing blue lights, was going to get her to the hospital quicker than she could get there herself unhindered by a phone. She told them where she was headed, told them to look for Mia, and hung up.

In the back seat of his car Sam groaned once and then no more.

The sight of her face in the rear-view mirror startled her. Her lips were purple. She hadn't realised how cold she was.

Sam was in theatre by ten, and it was ten-thirty when she padded to reception, her bare feet going *squee squee* on the linoleum. *Mag ek die telefoon gebruik*, she asked a lady with a wool cardigan stretched tight over her ship's-prow chest.

First she phoned Mia's house. There was no answer.

She asked the receptionist if she could make an international call. The receptionist said no.

Cassie cycled through the numbers on Sam's cell phone until she found *Mom and Dad San Fran* and pressed Dial. She could not muster the selflessness to dread the news she was about to deliver as the phone rang nine, ten, eleven, twelve times, before Sam Sr. picked up. Sam's been shot, Sam, was what she managed to say before the airtime ran dry and the call cut out. Reviled did I live said I as evil I did deliver. A parent should not have to bury a child.

Then she went and sat down again with the phone in his hands, waiting for him to phone back, around her shoulders the wool cardigan that the receptionist had lent her, the chest area stretched out enough for her to fold her arms inside it with the buttons done up. Underneath it, she was still in Sam's t-shirt, now beginning to dry – she had left all their clothes at the dam – and the plastic seat was wet and squelchy behind and underneath her when at last it came: great spongy glops of blessed, infantile, somebody-else's-problem-now panic running rough-shod up her oesophagus and quivering into the air around her.

For the rest of her life, Cassie would associate the sensation of panic with the texture of wet cotton.

The voice speaking in her head now was no longer the no-nonsense crisis management voice that had sustained her thus far, but her own, small, scared, very alone. It was at this moment of trading interior voices, like trading in your rented bowling shoes or ice-skates for your regular old left takkie where it has been stowed in smelly cubby-hole number thirty-seven, that she realised whose voice it had been in her head up until then, who had said pressure stops the bleeding, and the horses at least are calm, and who had said Cassie, it seems wrong but it's right: you have to leave him now. You have to leave him so you can go and get the car. She realised because the voice fled her then and left her alone with herself, and she was really only very young, and just a girl, and she wanted him to come back and take over again. A thought she had not had in years nor ever expected to have again.

I want my daddy.

She wanted her father with his clever antiseptic hands, wanted him to assemble his knowledge like scaffolding around her and say a string of things she didn't understand followed by the words 'he's going to be just fine.'

But it was Sam's father who arrived instead, a day later, on the first flight out of San Francisco, Sam's father with his hands that were strong but not clever, Sam Loudon Senior whose knowledge was all about dams and bridges and who cried and went pale and buckled at the knee when the surgeon who had operated on Sam for six hours said a string of things neither of them understood followed by the news that Sam was not going to be just fine, not at all, far from it.



## II

### SNAKE-OIL

Now I quite acknowledge that these allegories are very nice, but he is not to be envied who has to invent them; much labour and ingenuity will be required of him; and when he has once begun, he must go on and rehabilitate Hippocentaurs and chimeras dire. Gorgons and winged steeds flow in apace, and numberless other inconceivable and portentous natures. And if he is sceptical about them, and would fain reduce them one after another to the rules of probability, this sort of crude philosophy will take up a great deal of time. Now I have no leisure for such enquiries; shall I tell you why? I must first know myself, as the Delphian inscription says; to be curious about that which is not my concern, while I am still in ignorance of my own self, would be ridiculous. And therefore I bid farewell to all this; the common opinion is enough for me. For, as I was saying, I want to know not about this, but about myself: am I a monster more complicated and swollen with passion than the serpent Typho, or a creature of a gentler and simpler sort, to whom Nature has given a diviner and lowlier destiny?

- Plato; *Phaedrus*

No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear.

- C. S. Lewis



On December the twelfth, Cassie Harris took a train to Edinburgh to meet her father, and Mia sat with her boyfriend and her sister in her kitchen in Tooting, breathing in wafts of coriander and coconut and listening to the rain butting the windows and the hard earth outside in wind-tossed volleys with a sound like applause at a golf tournament.

Helena was making chicken green curry. Matt was reading the newspaper. Mia was listening to *Oscar Peterson's Finest Hour* and looking forward to the chicken green curry. In front of her was a sketchpad, and in her hand a pencil.

'I thought she was planning on staying until the twentieth,' said Helena.

'She said she was running out of money,' said Mia.

'Oh. Right.'

However, thought Mia, when Cassie had said she was running out of money, she had also said that she would leave next week. But today was Sunday.

When Mia had risen that morning, she had found Cassie on the phone to her father, with her bags packed beside her.

'I'm sorry for the short notice,' said Cassie. 'I think it's better if I arrive in Edinburgh on the weekend. It's less hassle for my father and step-mother. There's a train at ten, so I'd better hurry.'

'We'll take you,' said Mia. 'If you insist on going. Matt's got his car here, there's no need for you to lug your bags through the underground again.'

'Thanks.' Cassie smiled. She was still wearing that bandanna. Mia had been wearing it in Camden Town the day before, and she had lent it to Cassie when her hairband broke. Mia had told her to keep it.

'I'm sorry if this is a stupid thing to say,' said Mia. 'But I have to ask, I mean, I hope this doesn't have anything to do with last night.'

'Don't be ridiculous.'

She hugs like a wrestler, Matt had said as they watched her onto her train, the blue bandanna bobbing through the crowd. She had not been in London long enough to get used to cheek-kissing, and had embraced them both.

Helena reached up to get a bowl from the top cupboard, balancing herself with one hand on Matt's shoulder. 'When is she coming back?' she said.

'I'm not sure. After Christmas.'

Helena paused in her movements, and looked at Mia. 'Isn't it Sam's birthday today?' she said.

'Yes,' said Mia. 'How on earth did you remember?'

'Because it's the day before Sonya's. I remembered baking two cakes in a row in J. Bay that one year.'

'Who is Sam?' said Matt.

'A friend of ours,' said Mia.

She knew Helena would try to meet her eye, to make sure that Mia would register her surprise at Matt's question, so she looked down at the page in front of her and concentrated on her drawing.

She was trying to draw Matt, but she couldn't get the eyes right.

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It was the end of November, and Mia was too old to be playing gummi, but Katrina and her best friend Gabi had asked her to make up a third, so that was what they were doing. Katrina and Gabi were also too old to be playing gummi, and young enough to care about the fact that they were too old. But no one was watching, and it was such a beautiful day that the teenage girls could afford to emerge blinking from the White Stripes and Fashion Channel and aerosol-masked bidi smoke that had passed thus far this afternoon for studying in Katrina's room, and shed their socks.

The sprinkler was on, and they had joined Mia in jumping through the spray, the younger girls still in their gym clothes, when someone had said the word, and a pair of laddered stockings found for the purpose.

'*Jy's in die middel*,' said Katrina.

'Wag,' said Gabi, tucking her netball skirt into her panties, which were regulation blue, and tucking dripping bangs back into slides, which were non-regulation purple. She had a French plait today. Breasts already bigger than Mia's would ever be jouncing in her sports-bra as she sang *apple on a STICK, makes me SICK, makes my heart go two-forty-SIX!* They shrieked ironically as the stocking, sodden from the sprinkler, spat water into their faces when Gabi snapped it with a heel.

It had been Mia's turn to jump, and she was showing them how to do it old school – ingle angle silver bangle inside outside inside ON – when the doorbell rattled and Tosca barked. A minute later her mother's voice echoed out from inside.

'Miaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa?'

'Jaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa?'

'Dis Saaaaaaaaaaa-aaaaaaaaaam.'

She unleashed herself from the stocking. Katrina untucked her netball skirt from her panties.

He was already on the stoep, chatting to Inneke, by the time she turned the corner.

'Howzit, bru,' she said, kicking his foot.

'Not bad, brunette.'

'He's a free man,' said Inneke.

'So you're finished! Did it go okay?'

'I think it was all right.' He lifted his eyes. 'Hey, Katjie', he said to Katrina, who had sauntered onto the porch and stood with her arms crossed across her wet netball shirt. Gabi showed no such compunctions. She wrung hers out as she approached, exposing a set of precociously well-sprung hip-bones and a taut navel which seemed to Mia to eye them with the same exultant ennui that its owner did.

'We thought we'd come and kidnap you,' said Sam to Mia. 'We're going to go and swim at the dam.'

'Who's we?'

'Just me and Cassie.' He turned as he said it, and Mia saw Cassie approaching from the car. She waved. 'I'm afraid we're going to have to borrow some towels and such. Are you busy?'

'Not really...'

'But? Oh God. It's *Buffy*, isn't it?'

Mia lowered her head.

'Tape it.' He smiled at the younger girls. 'Want to come along?'

'Cool, why not,' said Katrina.

'Your maths exam, that's why not,' said Inneke.

'*Ag Ma, dis eers Woensdag*,' said Katrina, but already she was traipsing back through the front door.

'Are your...' Inneke called after her.

'Ja, Ma, my feet are dry.'

Sam raised his eyebrows at Mia. 'We have strawberries,' he said coaxingly.

Mia smiled. 'Just give me a minute and I'll get changed.'

\*\*\*

The most beautiful thing Cassie had ever seen in her life was a bird of prey that flew down Sam's chimney one morning in the autumn of their last year together. Sam laughed out loud with the joy of playing host to this unwilling visitor as they ran around the living room throwing windows open and looking for long things with soft ends to pry it from its perch and guide it with a firm but gentle hand towards freedom. Tough love.

'Is it a hawk?' Cassie had said, breathless, as she aimed a tentative feather duster towards the bird, scared of hurting it, of being hurt by it, of being forced to favour one over the other.

'It's a falcon,' said Sam. 'I think it's a peregrine falcon.'

It was not just that the falcon was beautiful, though it was that, with its bullet-head and its slate blue soot-stained back and its creamy mottled chest. It was the juxtaposition of all this with indoor Monday Deadline normality that was beautiful. It was the fact that the falcon's fluty CA CA CA CA was resounding off beige Dulux instead of disappearing into miles of veld and blue ether; the thrill of being impaled on that hard fearless eye from the height of a curtain pelmet rather than a treetop. It was the splotches of falconcrap on the white love-seat.

The falcon found its way to a window then and hammered off in an indignant flurry of wildness and freeness and it was gone and she missed it.

*Peregrine falcon*, wrote Cassie.

She would fill in the rest later.

She was sitting slumped with her temple against the window, her reflection draped like gauze across the Yorkshire heath. Yet another person had struck up a vigorous conversation on his mobile phone. Could you speak up, mate, I'm on a train, the connection's not good, he bellowed. Cassie sighed through her nose and turned back to the window.

This ghost-face that got caught in glass. This chick had issues, bru.

Across the face, fleets of raindrops, like zygotes, raced horizontally towards London. Behind it, a great cloud bank lay sloped across the Eastern horizon, covering the entire lower half of the sky with the rain-thickened sunlight diffusing through it in a way that reminded Cassie of Mia's painting of Matt. Against the cloud bank wheeled a raptor. It was probably miles above the ground, the bird, but from this distance it appeared as if it was directly in line with her eyes. As she watched it drew its wings in and plunged. The ghost-face smiled translucently at its grace. A voice from the next booth droned on and on and on about some child who had just been diagnosed with ADHD.

Cassie had chosen a seat in the silent carriage in the hope of getting some sleep, but the parent of the child with ADHD had started speaking on a mobile phone the moment the train left King's Cross, and others, emboldened by his success, had followed suit.

Abandoning the notion of a nap, Cassie flipped back to the front of the journal. *I'm sorry about that business with Davy last night, she wrote. You mustn't think badly of Mia or Matt though. They just don't understand. How they could have imagined that that soiled piece of London detritus could follow you is beyond me, but they meant well.*

She looked up, and her eyes settled again on the blind man who had taken the seat opposite her when she boarded at King's Cross. At his feet, a big white dog, licking its forepaws. It had on a yellow jacket that said *Please Do Not Disturb Me, I am Working*.

I need a jacket like that, she thought, and considered saying it out loud, with a vague notion that it would be polite to indicate her presence in case he was not aware of it.

She was examining him, his rain-flattened hair, the colour of wet sand (and presumably the colour of dry sand when it was, in fact, dry), the fingerless gloves, when his eyes came to rest on her. Reflexively she smiled her smile for strangers, before dropping her eyes back to the page.

*You would like Matt, I think, she wrote.*

For a moment the flutter of wistfulness came back to her and she paused, wondering if she dared put it on paper. *I'm going to see my father today, she continued, as the train rolled to a halt at York.*

*I'm sorry that he never got a chance to meet you.*

Of course she had pictured that too. Her father's formality and caution, and Sam winning him over in the space of ten heartbeats with his eyes, his smile, his helpfulness to Lynn in the kitchen, his Dr. and Dr. Harris, what a pleasure to finally meet you, his Sir, may I have the honour of asking for your daughter's hand.

*There isn't one mile of this journey that I have not imagined travelling with you, wrote Cassie.*

A loud ringing startled her, and the blind man pulled out a mobile phone from the pocket of his coat. Hello? Aye, I'm on my way, I'll be there about lunch-time he said, and Cassie surmised that he was bound for Edinburgh too. The ticket lady, who had just entered, descended swiftly upon him and insisted that he stop using his phone. This is a silent car, she hissed, gesturing uselessly towards the various signs indicating as much. Well, Ah didn't bloody noo tha', did Ah? He responded.

Cassie snorted at the injustice of it, and the blind man smiled. So he did know I was here, she thought. She felt bad that she could tell so much about him just by looking, and all he had of her thus far was this small laugh. When we reach Edinburgh, I will help him off the train, she thought.

But by the time they reached Waverley, he had fallen asleep. There was no reaction when she tried to draw his attention, so she reached over and shook his arm.

'Excuse me,' she said. 'It's the end of the line.'

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It was not her father she found waiting for her, but her step-brother. She spotted him immediately on the platform, blazing out amidst the sea of pasty, tweed-encased Scots like some creature of myth with his golden skin and black eyes. She waved, and he made his way towards her, managing his shoulders and long arms through the crowd as if they were wayward children. She remembered that about him now that she saw him again, the way he always seemed to be flailing about even when he was standing perfectly still. It was still there in spirit, the ranginess, but he was broader in the chest now.

He kissed her on the cheek with only a little self-consciousness, and embraced her with one arm. It was the first time he'd done anything like that in all the years she had not-quite-known him, and she was touched.

'What a nice surprise to see you,' she said. He smiled and she noticed the new lines flanking his mouth.

'It's been a long time,' he said, echoing her thoughts. 'Let me help you with your bags.'

'Thanks. Is it just you?'

'Alex couldn't make it. He said to tell you sorry.'

'Oh. It doesn't matter.'

She followed him out onto Princes Street, soft and dankly fragrant in the rain. Justin frowned at her denim jacket. 'Here,' he said, taking off his raincoat and slinging it over both their heads. 'We're not far.' He pointed. They walked with heads lowered, brisk and silent, their breath misting noisily in the shared womb of the raincoat, until they reached the car.

'I hope you're not cutting class on my account,' she said, trying for a teasing tone, as she helped him load the luggage into the boot of her father's Station Wagon.

He exhaled with a 'huh' noise. 'Nobody told you?'

'What?'

'I'm not studying for now. I've been sent down.'

'Expelled?'

'Not quite. Suspended.'

'Oh!' All her conversations with her father over the past few months had been almost exclusively about herself. Had she even asked after him? 'I'm sorry to hear it,' she said uncomfortably.

'Yeh, well. I can go back next year, but I'm not sure if I want to. I don't think Commerce is for me.'

Commerce, that was it. 'What have you been up to since... since then?'

'This and that,' he said. 'I'm working as a barman for the moment.' He banged the boot shut. 'Hop in, then. It's open.' Cassie hopped in.



'How about you? Philosophy, wasn't it?' said Justin, climbing in beside her.

'I'm halfway through Masters.'

'I'm sorry about what happened to your boyfriend.'

It caught her off-guard. She turned to regard his fronded eyes. 'Thank you.'

'It must have been terrible for you.'

'I. It's.'

'I'm sorry. I'm sure you don't want to talk about it.'

'It's not that I don't want to. I just never figured out how.'

'I understand.' He attempted a smile, absently rubbing either arm just above the elbow with the opposite hand. She watched the gesture with a jolt of recognition. It was something she did too at times. On some level, Alexander Harris had clearly become a father to him after all.

There was no-one home when they arrived at the single-storey stone house in Cramond where the reconstituted Harris family lived. Cassie had stayed here only once before, in the summer three years earlier, soon after they had moved up from London. The walls still smelt of fresh paint then. It felt more like a home now, she thought, or perhaps it was just the sudden relief of warmth and the rain dribbling down the windows. They carried her luggage down the passage, and without thinking Cassie opened the second door to the left, where she had slept on her last visit, just as her step-brother opened the door opposite.

'No,' said Justin with a startlingly effective-looking smile. 'That's my room. You're in here.'

'You live here?'

'I do now. I was in residence until –'

'Right. Of course. Sorry.' She crossed into what was now a spare bedroom, with an oak vanity, heavy cream-coloured curtains and a matching comforter on the double-bed. 'My word,' she said, putting her suitcase down. 'There was nothing but boxes and bicycles and stuff in here before.'

'My mother's been busy,' he said. 'Hope it will do.' He rubbed his hands together. 'So, can I, er... make you some tea, or anything like that?'

So formal. The pathos of it seized her suddenly by the larynx. She wished that they might have shared something before this. A common predicament long resolved, a private joke, one real conversation, even an argument – anything that they could lean against now that they were both adults alone together in their family home and so painfully aware of the absence of a history.

'Some tea would be nice,' she said.

But then they heard the front door open with a rustle of grocery bags and the tapping of heels on tile. 'Hellooooo, Justin? Are you back?'

'My mother's here,' said Justin, looking relieved. They went out through the living-room to greet her.

Lynn Harris exclaimed over Cassie, dropping bags in order to kiss her hello. Cassie inhaled a cloud of something herby and natural, a more concentrated version of the scent that lingered in various corners of the house. Was it lavender? Mia would know.

Justin went out to fetch the rest of the shopping from the car while Cassie helped Lynn carry her bags through to the kitchen. Her step-mother had already launched into an animated, all-embracing monologue, comments, questions and scraps of anecdote interlaced with deft abandon, her voice leaping amongst the kitchen cabinets as she packed things away and took things out. The weather, the railway strike, the anchovies she planned to add to the Osso Buco that night (you *do* eat anchovies, don't you), the likelihood of a white Christmas. Soon Cassie found herself pouring milk into teacups while gaily recounting the episode with the blind man and the ticket lady. Justin staggered into the room with more bags, and soon he too was talking and unpacking and laughing a great booming laugh that Cassie did not remember hearing before.

'Alex and I will be working until Christmas weekend, I'm afraid, but Justin is free during daylight hours,' she said. 'He'll be happy to show you around, won't you love?'

'Show her around? Certainly, I can do that.'

'Why don't you two go into town tomorrow? If it's still raining, you could always catch a movie, or maybe go to the gallery.'

Justin looked dubious. 'Well, I -'

'Don't worry,' said Cassie. 'I don't want to intrude.'

'No, it's not that,' said Justin. 'I'm meeting a friend, that's all. But you could come along. She won't mind.'

'Who's that?' asked his mother.

'Just a friend,' he answered. 'You haven't met her.'

'How mysterious.'

'Ma, please.' *Ma*. The remnant of South Africa sounded lonely to Cassie in amongst all those London vowels.

'Are you hungry, Cassie?' said Lynn. 'I can make you some soup and toast.'

'No no, I'm fine, thank you. I had a sandwich on the train.'

'Maybe you'd like to have a rest. Or a bath. A nice bath or a shower. You must be miserable after that soaking.'

She was flustered by the onslaught of offers and suggestions. Justin caught her expression and threw back a grin, allowing her an enlightening view of his teeth, which were, as Mia had pointed out, splendid. 'Let the poor girl alone,' he said lightly.

'I think I will go and take a bath, actually,' said Cassie.

'Yes, yes, you go,' said Lynn, taking her cup. 'Alex will be home soon.'

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He looks older in his horn-rims and the beard now scraggly like stuffing escaping from a couch. She is not prepared for his remorse, his thirst for reassurance. She did not think to expect this. He embraces her ferociously, then pats her arm, paces to the mantelpiece, sits down, springs up again to help her clear books and papers off the other sofa. He keeps scrutinising individual parts of her face and body, as if she were lying sliced up in Petri dishes, until she feels perverse sitting there in open possession of things like knees and lips. She is perplexed by his agitation. Can she have changed that much in a year and a half, that he cannot contain his shock? She knows she is thinner. He apologises for not coming to the train station, a meeting moved forward, unavoidable. She brushes it aside. For as long as she can remember, he has been sorry for the wrong things. My poor girl, you've been through so much, he says, and the reason for it all strikes her at last. She laughs inwardly at her own slow-wittedness. This is the first time he has seen her since it happened, any of it. It was the ordinariness of Lynn's greeting that threw her off track. The sleeping pills, she thinks. It might as well have happened yesterday, to him.

You're all right, though? He keeps asking. You're all right now.

Justin appears in the doorway, fresh from the shower, his hair wet and his skin glowing like lacquered maple. Sensing something amiss, he hesitates there, but he has been seen and it is too late now to withdraw.

'Justin, come and sit down,' says her father. 'Cassie and I were just catching up.' He sounds exhausted. Justin enters on soft bare feet and bends to shake hands with his step-father. Alex half-rises in response. The juxtaposition startles her, for she is sure that the last time she saw them in the same room together, of the two it was her father who was the man. Now, next to Justin, lacquered and blazing, even his awkward greeting blazing forth like God's first awkward greeting, Alexander Harris seems threadbare, moribund. She has never thought of him as a short man before. Or at least a not particularly tall man. When Lynn joins them, he sinks with thankful surrender into her easy high laughter about the antics of the neighbour's children. Cassie tries to follow the story, but she cannot. She keeps looking at him, wondering how she could have missed it in all those phone conversations, the slow accretion of guilt. *I should have come down, I should have come to you, forgive me, I didn't realise, I had commitments, it was unavoidable.* I used to ride on his shoulders, she thinks. In her mind he was immense and all-knowing, and then this. She cannot for the life of her call to mind anything in-between. She was not prepared.

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'Only three places,' said Lynn. 'Justin will be off to work in a minute or two.'

'Oh, right.' Cassie put one set of cutlery back in the drawer and began helping Lynn set the table for dinner. 'I'm glad Justin at least will be able to spend some time with you during the days,' she said. 'It works out quite nicely.'

'Yes, I'm very grateful to all of you for looking after me so well.'

'He's a good boy,' said Lynn, seeming not to have heard her. 'Maybe you can talk some sense into him. I certainly don't seem to have much effect. But a responsible, diligent young woman like you, pushing through in the face of adversity, you could set an example.'

'I... I suppose I could try,' said Cassie, embarrassed.

'Throwing his future away on an idiotic stunt like that. It's disgraceful. These young men feel they have to prove themselves to each other, you know. Each one trying to outdo the next in the stupidity of the risks they take. They think they're invincible.'

Cassie made noises of concurrence, not wishing to ask for details when it was clearly assumed she knew them already.

'Anyway, I suppose it might have been worse. I'll just bring the dishes through. Will you call your father?'

The three of them took their seats around the table. It was blond oak, and could seat ten when the flaps were extended. Cassie had known it since her seat was a high-chair. It had belonged to her father's mother, and had followed Alexander Harris through four homes, from Durban to Cape Town to London to Edinburgh. She stroked the golden surface thoughtfully. Good table.

'So how are things going at home?' asked Alexander Harris as Lynn dished them each a rich, red plate of stew. Here it comes, thought Cassie. He was always hungry for news about South Africa. Not just any news. Bad news. He wanted to hear about AIDS and crime and corruption and unemployment and the government turning a blind eye. It reminded her of something. Sam's friend Johan, who after months of deliberation had ended a problematic relationship. She remembered the way he lapped up accounts of his former girlfriend's subsequent peccadilloes, not so much from morbid fascination as from long-held doubts as to whether he had made the right decision.

'Not bad,' she said.

In the past she had sometimes wished she could oblige her father with tales of streets littered with dead bodies, despots hoarding money while the masses starved, when in truth her small life was sunny and bland. She did not recognise the country he talked about as her own. You have to see the Bigger Picture, he said. The Bigger Picture will pounce on you if you close your eyes. South Africa is a time-bomb. These things that he prophesied simply did not seem to apply to her life, until they came to fetch her out in that green and tender valley one hot summer's night. But now that she finally had a dead body to offer him, she found herself reluctant to disparage her country, for reasons she could not immediately fathom. She dredged through her mind for facts and figures that might interest him. She had not read a newspaper in months, but even so, she found she could now offer him a rewarding litany of horror stories. There were plenty to go around.

'They say one in four students at UCT is HIV positive,' she started. He shook his head in eager commiseration, adding another gleaming cylinder of shin-bone to the miniature graveyard at one edge of his plate, where the remains of the stew had been lined up in a neat row like a museum display.

*Skeleton of Osso Bucus Naturalis*. 'It's sad, it's sad,' he said. He put down his fork. 'But actually, I meant your home. You and your mother.'

'Oh,' said Cassie. 'We're doing fine.'

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'It can get a bit depressing at this time of year,' said Justin. 'Have you seen it in summer?'

'I have, yes.' But Cassie didn't feel as if she had seen it at all.

Looking through the window of the Station Wagon, Cassie tried to recognise streets and buildings, to muster a sense of familiarity with Edinburgh. On her last visit she had stayed mostly in Cramond. She and her father had come into town to do a few tourist things – the Castle, the Observatory – but it was only now, in the car with Justin, that she felt she was in a city that belonged to someone. It was in the way he typed text messages while cornering.

'What are the plans?' she asked as he parked.

'Lunch and maybe a movie. Aaltje wants to see something that's on at the Cameo, I forget the name. One of those art films. The Unbearable Lightness of Being John Malkovich or some such. I hope you can stomach that sort of thing.

'Aaltje. Is she Dutch?'

'Yep.'

When she asked how they knew one another, Justin offered her an expansive synopsis of their history, which necessitated invoking several other nodes in a network of people and places years in the making. To each proper noun he gifted an emphatic weight, as if he was listing key players and factors in a significant and little-understood period of world history.

Aaltje worked at something called Kilgrey, Kilgrey was where someone named Lucas lived, Lucas had been at university with Justin and someone named Rex. Aaltje and her colleagues frequented Quigley's, the pub where several of them had been employed at one time or another and where Justin was now hoping to make assistant manager in the not too distant future. Cassie nodded conscientiously after each name was gifted to her, as if in anticipation of a pop quiz.

They began walking towards the bus-stop on Lothian Road where they had arranged to rendezvous.

'So what is this Kilgrey place?' said Cassie.

'It's the funny farm out in Borders.'

'The what?'

'You're right; it's not very politically correct to call it that. It's a kind of centre for, you know, retarded people.'

'Still not doing great on the politically correct front, there.'

'Oh whatever. Uniquely challenged. Extra crispy. I lose track of what's fashionable... you can ask Aaltje. There she is,' said Justin. He waved. Cassie saw a flaxen-haired woman in a poncho raise her

hand in return. There was a young man with her, lanky, with a long, thin face and electric blue eyes. They were holding hands.

Justin greeted her and introduced Cassie.

'I never knew you had a step-sister, Justin,' said Aaltje, shaking her hand.

'She's from South Africa.' He turned to the young man at Aaltje's side, who seemed mesmerised by something across the road. 'Hello, Cameron,' he said.

'Say hello to Justin and Cassie, Cam,' said Aaltje in a coaxing voice, and Cassie discarded her earlier impression, made from a distance, that the two were a couple. 'Cameron?' Cameron's head was panning in slow arcs like a search-light, his startling eyes seeming to take in both everything and nothing. 'Not today,' said Aaltje, smiling apologetically. 'I'm just taking him to his parents. I meant to do it before I came to meet you, but I'm afraid we had a bit of a crisis with one of the other residents, so I'm running late.'

'No problem,' said Justin. 'I can run you there if you like. Where do they live?'

'The Old Town. I'll show you.'

They walked back to the car, and Aaltje helped Cameron into the back seat. As they drove, Cassie found herself catching his eyes repeatedly in her visor mirror. She was taken aback by his unwavering gaze. She was wondering if he was capable of speech, when the answer arrived so suddenly that it caused her to jump.

'Where's Mummy?' he said loudly in an unexpected, upbeat game-show-host voice.

'We're on our way to her now, Cam,' said Aaltje.

'Wheeeeere's Daddy?'

'With Mummy.'

'Daddy's with Mmmmmummy!'

'That's right.'

'Where's Ursula?'

'Back at Kilgrey. Turn left, Justin.'

'What an interesting fellow,' said Cassie to Justin while Aaltje was seeing Cameron safely to his door.

'Isn't he.'

'What's his, ah, condition? Do you know?'

'Oh, it's something with an odd name, sounds like the title of a sci-fi movie.'

Aaltje waved goodbye and returned to the car. 'Well, now I can relax for a while. I'll get him again at six.'

'Right,' said Justin, starting the car. 'What's good in this area? Or shall we just go to Gonzo's?'

'Fine with me,' said Aaltje.

Gonzo's turned out to be a burger joint, and Aaltje turned out to be the sort of person who asks so many questions that they tend to find out more about one in an hour, in terms of bald facts, than other people learn in the course of years. Cassie could see Justin listening with a bemused look as she trotted out her history unto the fifth generation, his jaw muscles bucking while he chewed on his GonzoBurger.

'So has your brother been taking good care of you?' said Aaltje, with an expression that suggested, wryly, that she thought it unlikely that this would be the case.

Cassie smiled. She could not remember anyone having referred to Justin as her brother before. She studied him, trying out the word on him as if she were holding up a shirt to see whether it matched his eyes. He seemed to misinterpret the lingering glance as a reprimand.

'What?' he said, 'I'm taking you out to lunch, aren't I?'

He lifted his burger, and Cassie watched with interest as a good third of it disappeared between his splendid teeth. There was a functional power to their fearful symmetry which was almost alarming. They looked like they could crush eland femurs. How had she failed to notice it before, when Mia had remembered it all these years after one meeting? It was probably just a question of contrast, literally and figuratively; she considered, having been subjected to the moodier palette of London dentitions for the last three weeks.

'Have you moved to the U.K. permanently?' said Aaltje, returning to what seemed an endless inner checklist.

'No, no. I'm just here for a while,' said Cassie. 'I'll be going back.'

'That's what they all say,' said Justin with his mouth full.

'Well it's the truth in my case. I only have a year left on my visa.'

'There's plenty of ways to get around that,' said Justin. 'You could marry a Brit.'

'I have no desire to get around it. Or to marry a Brit, for that matter.'

'Why? What do South African men have that British men don't?'

'Tans. And I have to finish my degree.'

'You should get out while you still can,' said Justin. 'Immigration laws are tightening up, you know. And South Africa is turning into a three-ring circus.'

'Oh, come on. You're beginning to sound like my dad,' said Cassie. 'It's not the heart of darkness.'

'Geographically, no. More like the arse-end of darkness.'

Cassie looked at him curiously, wondering what its source was, and how deep it ran, this easy rancour. 'Why do you keep *skeefing* me?' he said.

Cassie burst into laughter, which was unfortunate, as she had a mouthful of Coke on board. '"Skeefing!" she and Aaltje said at the same time, although Aaltje voiced it interrogatively.

'It means "looking at me funny",' said Justin to Aaltje.

'When last were you even there?' said Cassie.

'Three years ago.'

'My, you certainly do have your finger on the pulse of the nation.'

'So maybe my slang is out of date. So what. I follow the news,' said Justin.

'Do you really?'

'Well even if I don't, you're not going to try and tell me that everything has come right since then.'

'No, I'm not saying that.'

'Honestly, Cassie. You must be able to see it. Perhaps it's more obvious when you've been away for a while. You'll notice when you go back... the age of our kind has passed. The last time I was there, I decided for good that there was nothing about the place that I related to anymore.' He sighed and gazed out across the sweeping, war-ravished vistas of Home Street. 'So I said to myself, I will diminish, and go into the West, and remain Silveira.'

'What's that?' said Cassie, laughing.

'Galadriel,' said Justin.

'Galadriel?'

'*Lord of the Rings*...?'

'Oh, right. I didn't see it,' said Cassie.

'Why on Earth not?'

'I thought I'd like to read the book first.'

'You haven't read it?'

'I haven't got round to it yet.'

'But... you're twenty-two!' said Justin.

'Big fan, are you?' said Cassie, spotting an opportunity.

'You should see him going on at Kilgrey,' said Aaltje. 'They like to run around hunting orcs and speaking Elvish.'

'Then you should know Tolkien was born in South Africa,' said Cassie to Justin.

'To its endless credit, yes. South Africa did give the world Tolkien.'

'And heart transplants. And... razor-wire.'

'Yes, yes, and Charlize Theron,' said Justin. 'But Cassie, why defend it? I would think you of all people...' he tailed off abruptly. She was glad that he had stopped himself, not only because of the subject he had almost broached, but because she had no ready answer to his question. Where did it come from, this stain of loyalty? When had she suddenly grown a patriotic conscience?

Deciding to change the subject, she turned to Aaltje. 'So Kilgrey is the... the place where you work?' she asked, finding herself temporarily at a loss for an alternative to "funny farm". 'What do you do there?'

'We take care of adults with learning disabilities,' said Aaltje.

'That's it,' said Justin. 'Learning disabilities!' Aaltje raised an eyebrow at him. 'I was trying to remember the official expression,' he explained.

'And Cameron is one of your...'

'One of the residents, yes.'

'What is his... his condition?'



'He has Fragile X syndrome,' said Aaltje.

'Fragile eggs?'

'No, no, x, like x and y. It means his x chromosome has a missing gene.'

'Goodness me. Is it rare?'

'Not particularly. You've heard of autism?'

'Sure.'

'Well, Fragile X is the most common cause of autism. That's why there are so many autistic boys compared to girls. Girls have two x chromosomes, so if one of them has the problem, the other one can still compensate.'

'What did you study to get into this field?'

'Dance,' said Aaltje, smiling. She had chipmunk teeth and Cassie could tell from the way she smiled that she was self-conscious about them, but she nevertheless liked to smile a lot. The resultant conflict gave her face an infectiously humorous look.

'Dancing!' said Cassie. 'You mean like ballet?'

'And jazz and tap. Not that you could tell to look at me now.'

'Oh, come,' said Justin. 'You're a waif.'

'Hush, you. You should come and see the place some time, Cassie,' said Aaltje. 'And you too, Justin,' said Aaltje. 'It's been ages since you visited.'

'It has,' said Justin. 'I'm still recovering.'

Aaltje laughed. It was something of a standing joke at Kilgrey, she explained to Cassie, that due to a vastly imbalanced ratio of male to female employees, visiting men tended to be enthusiastically greeted.

'We're having a party at New Year's, if you're interested,' she said to Cassie. 'Although I suppose you'll want to check out Hogmanay if it's your first time here.'

'Bah. She can live without paying twenty quid for the privilege of an evening spent walking through an ankle-deep mire of broken glass and vomit.'

After the movie, Justin took Aaltje to pick up Cameron and dropped them at the bus station. They set out for Cramond just after six.

'Um, by the way,' said Justin once they were on the road. 'I'm sorry if I said the wrong thing back there at the restaurant. I didn't mean to insult your, you know, homeland, or whatever.'

She smiled crookedly. 'That's all right. It's your homeland too, isn't it? So you can say anything you like about it.'

'Not really. I'm a British citizen. But I want you to know, I don't actually have anything against the place.'

'If you say so.' She knew it sounded as if she were sceptical, but she had already concluded that this was probably the case.

'Honestly, I wish it the best of luck. I prefer it here, that's all.'

'I can understand how you might not want to live there, but...'

'But?'

'Well, why did you stop visiting?'

'Oh...' he sighed. 'There's just nothing left for me there, Cassie.'

'But... your father?'

'As I said, there's nothing left for me there.'

They past three fields and one tiny, low-slung village before Justin saw fit to continue. 'Okay. You want the whole story. My father and I had a row the last time I came down. I had just turned twenty-one. They threw me a big family party, uncles and aunts and cousins I hardly remember. It all felt so, you know, forced. As if someone had hired me a family for the day.'

'That's... sad,' said Cassie.

'It was. And then, during his speech my father made some comment about handing over the crown. Took me completely by surprise. Afterwards I asked him what he meant by it. He sat me down and told me it was time for me to move to Johannesburg and start preparing to take over his business.'

'What? You really had no warning?'

'Well, I mean, I knew he'd had it in mind when I was younger, only son and heir raised from a comber of purple wool to wear the royal diadem *et cetera et cetera*, but I honestly thought he'd discarded the idea long ago. My life is here, and has been for years.'

'What was his business again? Cars?'

'Alfa Romeos. He has a dealership with three branches. I guess he'll sell it soon. The old bugger is getting on. You know he's quite a bit older than my mum. You never met him, did you?'

'No.'

'He can make himself very unpleasant when someone threatens his Grand Master Plan. But I just don't want any part of it. The life he's trying to shove me into is not my life. I meant it when I said I don't relate to anything over there. I'm not South African anymore. I'm not a Joburg Porcho. And I'm certainly not a bloody Catholic. I don't say 'hundreds, bru' when people ask me how I am and I don't call strangers my cousin. I don't wear gold jewellery. And I'll be damned if I'm going to spend my life peddling overpriced cars. I can think of a thousand things I'd rather do with my time.'

'What *do* you want to do?'

'Lots of things. Travel some more, for one.'

'But what do you want to *do*? Professionally. Why were... are you studying Commerce?'

'It's a good basis.'

'For what?'

'We'll see. I'm keeping my options open.'

Realising this sounded lame, he qualified defensively, as if she had said as much: 'Actually, I'm starting a band, since you want to know.'

'A band! You want to be a musician?'

'I don't know about *being* this or *being* that. I just like to play music, you know?'

'Okay,' said Cassie.

'Okay? What do you mean, okay?'

'I don't mean anything. So where does your band play?'

'Well nowhere yet.'

'Okay.'

'Stop that.'

'Sorry.'

They drove past a second tiny village. *Inglenook*, the sign by its bus-stop said. Cassie wondered if there were really people who lived in such places their entire lives.

'Do you feel like going up for that party at New Year's?' said Justin.

'If I'm still here, I'd love to come,' said Cassie.

'If you're still here?' said Justin.

'I have to go back to London sooner or later,' said Cassie. The amount of dread that this prospect roused in her was disconcerting.

'No point going before the business year kicks in, if you ask me,' said Justin.

'No,' said Cassie. 'I guess not.'

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Cassie watched carefully as Justin opened his present from her. She had deliberated longest over this one. Originally, she had intended to give him the latest Booker Prize winner, with vague intentions of expanding his literary horizons. Then she chastised herself for behaving like her own mother, reassigned it to Lynn, and bought him instead a copy of *Gulliver's Travels*, (which she had been shocked to learn he had not read,) the motivation in the end coming to the same.

She laughed when she opened her present from him: he had given her *Lord of the Rings*.

Christmas Eve at the second Harris household had been a modest affair, and yet for all that it felt more festive than the previous one. It didn't have much to beat.

Turkey and new potatoes and white wine took their course, and the mood was one of hilarity. It sprung, to Cassie's surprise, from her father's quarter: he had spent most of the day at the hospital, and had reached the level of fatigue that brought out the clown in him rather than the curmudgeon. As Alexander Harris raked his wit across the course of the hours, wife and step-son stepping in with comments of increasing absurdity, Cassie thought she had begun to see how they worked as a family; Lynn, Justin, Alex. For the first time since her arrival, she felt herself a guest in their midst.

Lynn had gone to Mass on Christmas morning, and Justin had accompanied her out of a primordial soup of guilt and loyalty that his step-sister could scarcely have fathomed if she tried.

She and her father alone for two hours; it had been easier than she thought. She was worried only that he would try, again, to talk to her about Sam; that this was still in the offing. But instead they had played chess, and enjoyed it. Cassie had made sure to direct the conversation towards other topics.

His first attempt had come soon after she arrived. She had expected it to happen sooner or later, but not at three-thirty in the morning on the peak night of the annual Geminid meteor shower.

He had come into her room at two a.m, mercilessly flicking on her overhead light to stop her from dozing off again, as if he was waking her for school. Cassie groaned. 'Hurry, we're missing it,' he said. 'Put on something warm.'

That he could still get so excited over a lightshow. It caused her a moment's bittersweet fondness, as it had earlier the previous evening when he had reminded her, lest she had forgotten – which she had – that this was the peak night of the annual Geminid meteor shower.

It was not such a reliable crowd pleaser as the Perseids, but this year was slated to give a higher than average yield. There was no moon, and here on the outskirts of Edinburgh the nights were more amenable to skygazing than they had been in London.

She pulled on a jersey and some shoes and went downstairs. Her father was in the kitchen, boiling the kettle for a thermos of tea.

'Are you going to wake Lynn?' said Cassie.

'No, no. She's on call, she must sleep while she can,' he said. 'Besides,' he added, 'this is not really her sort of thing.' He smiled with the air of a confederate, as much as to say, this is our sort of thing.

They sat outside in the cold clear air on an old blanket, watching the points of light appear, streak through the atmosphere and then burn away into nothingness as if they had never been. At first one or the other would point and say 'look!' whenever a new one nosed into view, but soon they were coming so thick and fast that it was academic.

Their further attempts at conversation were only barely polysyllabic.

It was the first occasion on which she had spent any length of time alone with him since she had arrived, and she was glad of the spectacle above. It served, she thought, the same role as a movie screen on a first date; obscuring the hideous truth that you and a relative stranger have come to the same place at the same time for the express purpose of getting to know each other better.

Except that in this case, the problem was not that they were strangers, but that they were very nearly the same person. She had been more right than she had guessed. In the intervening years they

had become so alike in so many crucial aspects of their character, that they now found themselves at a stalemate. The exchange of energy during their brief stabs at dialogue was so commensurately balanced that it amounted to no exchange at all.

'You and Justin seem to be getting on well,' said Alex.

'Yes...' said Cassie. 'He's changed a lot since I last saw him.'

'In what way?'

How could she say? She hadn't known him until now. 'I think he's more mature,' she hazarded.

Her father made a harrumphing noise. 'I certainly don't think his actions of late could be described as "mature."' He paused. 'Not meaning to sound uncharitable. But he does cause us some worry. And he's such a bright boy. It would be a great pity.'

He did not specify what would be a great pity, but Cassie was sure that if she asked he would start talking about self-actualisation, so she answered only with 'I'm sure he'll settle down in the end.' Not for the first time in the past hour, her own tone baffled her. Why was she talking like a third parent? A fourth parent.

'Yes. I'm sure he will.'

Another silence dragged its feet as the heavens wept brightly above them. What if she ended up like this? she thought. And what did she even mean by 'like this'? With who? When? 'I remember when we watched the Perseids for the first time,' she said. O nostalgia, that dog-eared mainstay of the socially shipwrecked.

'The first time...' he said. 'Remind me.'

'When I was five. When you and I were here.' Did he watch the Perseids with Justin? she suddenly wondered. What did *they* talk about, when they were alone together?

'In London?'

'No,' she said, no longer sure that he was only pretending to have forgotten. 'It was a beach. We took a train trip. You showed me Cassiopeia, remember?'

He was still for a long moment, then he laughed quietly through his nose, *Hm-hm*. 'Yes. The beach. I can't believe you remember that.'

'Of course I remember. Where was that?'

'It was not far from here, actually. St. Andrews, by the golf course.' He paused for a long moment. She could hear his breathing. If it had been audible before, she had not been aware of it. 'What else do you remember about that trip?' he said.

'Not very much. I remember being excited to stay awake so late.'

'Hmm.'

'I remember London much better.'

'Oh, yes!' he said, 'London...' as if London were something outlandish and distantly lewd that people rarely mentioned in polite company.

It was hopeless. There was no friction between them, no grip, no contrast. Just a haze, like a spinning colour wheel, a tunnel of mirrors, a vacuum, the human equivalent of a paradox of self-reference, like the Escher print he used to have in his study of the two hands drawing one another. She might as well have been sitting there alone.

She drained the tea that was left in the thermos lid and refilled it. 'We would have moved there, wouldn't we?' she said. 'You and me and Mom. That's why we came to join you. To take a look.'

'We were thinking about it, yes.'

'Why?'

'You know why, Cassie.'

'But you emigrated anyway, in the nineties, when it was clear that it would end soon.'

'There were other reasons by then. Reasons that were more obvious to us than they were to everyone else at that stage.'

'Us?'

'Lynn and I. All the doctors.'

'Oh, that. Of course.'

'There was this - '

*Time-bomb*, thought Cassie.

'- time-bomb, and nobody had the sense or the courage to take it seriously. Even now, when it's exploding in their faces, all the government does is run and hide.' He tapped his knees to punctuate. *Run. And. Hide.* 'No state doctor can work under those conditions. When we go back, it will to an administration that works with us rather than against us, or not at all.'

'When you go back?' said Cassie, wondering for a moment if she had heard correctly. 'But you've got British citizenship and everything. Do you really think...'

'One day,' he said, nodding. 'One day. South Africa is still our home.'

Cassie was dumbfounded. Do you still entertain that delusion? She thought. Years ago, she had, of course, believed him. He had believed it himself. At some indeterminate point in the uncharted reaches of the far future, Alexander Harris would return. She had since learned that such foma were common to those on their way out, and that it was best to humour them. Sam's parents had been the same. Even Mia's sister Sonya. Oh no, we're not *emigrating*, really. We'll be back eventually. And until then, we'll certainly visit.

But her father had been here for twelve years. She had assumed that he would have accepted by now that a clean break had been made.

'How is your thesis going?' said Alex.

'It's not, at the moment,' said Cassie noncommittally, her thoughts lagging behind.

'Well not right now, of course,' said her father. 'But how were you doing with it?'

'All right.'

'What have you arranged with the university?'

'I told them I would go on working while I was away, and send stuff back by email.'

'It was good of them to let you do that.'

It was indeed. Compassionate leave.

'You're writing about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, if I recall correctly?' said Alex.

Yes, she thought. He's right. They had always been good at this, ideas.

'More or less. I was writing about formalised catharsis and cathartic rhetoric. But I don't know anymore.'

'What don't you know anymore?'

Cassie shrugged. 'All that talking. All those get out of jail free cards. What purpose did it serve?'

'You're researching it. I'm sure you can answer that question better than I can. It allowed people to be heard.'

'But do you really think anyone actually felt better afterwards? Did one father, one wife, say "oh all right then, as long as he's sorry?"'

'No, but perhaps the whole society will have its conscience cleared. Collectively. In retrospect.'

'And who will be the judge of that?' said Cassie, who had come to her own conclusions about the conscience of whole societies, collectively, in retrospect. 'Who will presume to be society's biographer? Politicians, spin-doctors, and a handful of stuffy academics. Same as it's ever been. I don't know if I want to jump on that bandwagon.'

'Something happened in South Africa that has never happened anywhere else. That's true whether one puts it down on paper or not. But if people like you don't write about it, how can anyone else learn from it?'

'People learn from experience. Apartheid was experience. Even the TRC was experience. The stories that came out of it; those too, perhaps, had merit. But writing *about* it? Words don't seem to do anything but spawn more words. *Blah blah blah*. Each *blah* splits into two new *blahs* and none of them *does* anything.' She was surprised at her own vehemence. Apparently they were still talking about something personal after all.

'Words are all we have, unfortunately. There is nothing else,' said Alexander. 'We can't solve anything, or resolve anything, without them.'

'Nothing ever gets *resolved*, Dad. Not in this kind of debate. It's like the Hydra. Cut off its head and two new ones grow in its place. I feel like I'm adding to the monster.'

'Perhaps you can find a new angle on it. Slay the dragon.'

'I might trash the whole lot and do something else.' She had finally said it aloud, and so easily. The thought had lain there, grublike, largely unacknowledged, a possibility to be prodded and viewed sidelong in her more apathetic moments. Now it was said, and the words were like legs on which it could scuttle about.

'Trash it?' said Alex. 'You mean give it up? Why?'

'What can one usefully say about it except 'it happened'? Everything else, all the pontificating... it's just a load of nonsense. Angels on the head of a pin. Discourse is a virus, and I'm not sure I want to be a carrier.'

'You're turning into Wittgenstein, dear girl.'

'I feel more like C.S. Lewis. "The whole thing's a bloody mess."'

Alexander Harris paused, beginning to understand. 'He said that after his wife died.'

'Yes.'

'Of his theodicy.'

'Yes.'

*Scuttle scuttle.* It had feelers now too, apparently, and wings. And little chomping insect mandibles. And it had brought some friends along.

'We each have our religions, don't we?' said her father quietly.

'Yes.' And we each have our myths.

How do you picture it? she thought. What do you suppose you will do? You, Sam's parents, all the others. Come back at sixty-five, old enough to be in the country without being of the country. Retire to some white-walled fortress in the leafy suburbs, Constantia or perhaps Bishopscourt, somewhere quiet with a Kreepy-Krawly in the pool and a high wall bristling with passive infra-red detectors to guard against the intrusions of the terrors beyond the great iron gate. There to spend his last seasons, tennis in summer (How we missed the Cape sun!) and winters inside with a glass of Cabernet in the hand (ah, the Cape wines!) and the obligatory pair of golden retrievers sighing by the fire, their jowls turning slowly grey while the children are far away and happy, making something of themselves, making pounds, making dollars, making ties that will prove too dear to break. Burning bridges, becoming Californians, or Britons, or Australians, painstakingly forgetting that they were ever anything else; purchasing perhaps after a decade's slog across the sea a shining fortress of their own, to rent out to Belgians and to house them when they come down at Christmas, but most of all to await them like an embassy, a flag on the moon, an emblem of the abiding possibility that they too will one day return for good. They, like you, needing different dreams.

And oh, but they will certainly visit.

An earthgrazer coasted along the horizon in a gleaming headlong rush towards its own destruction.

She didn't see it coming, she was caught unawares when she tuned back in to find him talking in a soft, droning, bumblebee voice. She didn't see him approaching the topic until he had a hand on her shoulder. Her first instinct was to laugh: the casual association with a first date had just been catapulted into new depths of aptness – the premeditated arm slung around her shoulder, the good old Brady Manoeuvre. And now, his hand squeezing her far shoulder competently, his voice saying Sam's name, saying something about sleeping pills, and something about Moving On.

'Please,' she said. 'Dad. Don't.' She was not prepared.



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She knew, actually, exactly when it had started, or stopped, or died, or been born, depending on how you looked at it: when her will to continue had fizzled, when the nasty little notion had presented itself to her that her work would do more good if the hundred and fifty-odd pages she had written so far were shredded to stuff a blanket for a homeless person, or used for kindling. Perhaps she should suggest it to Mia as the germinal idea for an art project. Constructive book-burning.

It had been the day Dianne Loudon asked her to go to Kayamandi.

At the moment that Dianne had announced – on her behalf, to boot – that All Was Forgiven, and had invited Cassie to share in celebrating this fact with family of Sam's murderer, she had known right then that she didn't have much time for truth, and even less for reconciliation.

The redoubtable Professor Henry 'Mash' Mashiya, had been positive about her thesis thus far, at worst pencilling a 'pedestrian' or a 'workmanlike' (*pedistrian*, *wekmanlike*, Cassie sounded in her head) next to a particularly uninspiring paragraph. That about summed it up. She had been going through the motions. Fortunately she was good enough at the motions to get by. But that thing, that symphonic synergy of imagination and intellect, the flush of cerebral pleasure derived from disciplined thought leaping to unlooked-for insights, was gone, and she knew it. There was no faith, no belief, to back it up. If her country had given her a hero, it was Sikhumbuzo Mtimkulu. When Colonel Gideon Niewoudt, ex Special Branch leader, had visited his family to ask for forgiveness for torturing, poisoning, crippling, and finally murdering his father, the fifteen-year-old boy responded by breaking a vase over his head.

In her heart as she had watched the astounding footage on TV, a stadiumful of people rose to its feet and cheered that young man. Cohorts of warriors banged their swords on their shields in his honour. He rode a glorious golden float through the tickertape parade in celebration. There's some truth for you, she had thought. There's some flipping reconciliation.

'Here,' said Justin, loading a six-pack into Cassie's arms and startling her back into the present. He took the remaining two, one in each hand, and banged the boot shut with his elbow. 'I think we're early,' he said, glancing around. 'Looks a bit deserted, doesn't it?'

'It looks lovely,' said Cassie.

She had been expecting something more institutional for all Justin's lyrical descriptions. The long dirt road that marked their entry into Kilgrey's grounds had led them through a series of pastures where sheep grazed and cows hung their sweet blunt faces over uneven wooden fences. Then there was a length of forest, and at last a collection of cottages dotted around a single large building, which Justin told her had once been a schoolhouse. They had stopped beside what Justin referred to as Hill

Cottage. Dusk was just creeping down, and with it a silvery mist that pooled, as if on cue, over the already ridiculously picturesque little valley in which the buildings stood.

'My God,' said Cassie. 'It *is* the Shire.'

Justin laughed heartily. They had both just spotted a figure about four feet tall, trotting down between one of the other cottages and the schoolhouse, muttering to himself with his hand stuck firmly down the front of his trousers.

'That's Donald,' said Justin. 'The one and only hobbit. I would watch out for him if I were you. He's a terrible flirt.'

From around the back of the other cottage Cassie now saw a small procession following in the little figure's wake, down the hill to the parking lot and up the schoolhouse stairs.

'What's that big pile of wood and stuff for?' said Cassie, as she watched the group move past it.

'They make a bonfire,' said Justin. 'It will go up at midnight.'

Cassie turned at the sound of the back door being opened, and saw Aaltje stepping out into the yard.

'Supplies,' said Justin, holding up the beer.

'Excellent,' said Aaltje. 'Follow me. They're still having their tea down there, so we can join the others upstairs for now.'

'Sorry,' said Justin. 'Are we really terribly early?'

'Not at all,' said Aaltje. 'The Czechs have been drinking since three. Those that aren't on duty, of course. We just haven't moved the party downstairs yet. It's Eliska's birthday today, so we have every excuse to drink for two days solid.'

'Oh dear,' said Justin. 'I clean forgot.'

'She won't mind.'

They went back in by the door and up a set of stairs to another door. Beyond this was a long corridor with facing doors, most with nameplates and other decorations on the outside, and all of them closed. At the end of the corridor was yet another door, spring-loaded like the rest had been to close automatically behind them. They entered what looked like a self-contained apartment. Most of the doors were closed here too, but they were arranged around the short length of passage in a way that suggested these were one person's living quarters. Cassie heard music and laughter as they turned right into a small kitchen. There were about eighteen people crammed into the room, most of them seated around a rectangular table, playing cards. From the half-empty bottle of rum at the table's centre, and the fact that one of the players had a bra on over his shirt while another had a cigarette hanging from each of her nostrils, Cassie surmised that it was a drinking game.

'Justin!' said a number of female voices at once, including that of the woman seated at the head of the table. She rose to greet him.

'Penalty! Penalty!' said the man wearing the bra. 'At least one hand touching the table at all times until you get three of a kind.'

The woman rolled her eyes, downed the contents of the glass in front of her with grimacing efficiency, and came round to greet them. She was tall and skinny, with a pixie haircut and matching features.

'I'm so glad you can come!' she said. Cassie placed her accent as Eastern European, and concluded that she must be one of the aforementioned Czechs.

'Eliska, this is my step-sister Cassie,' said Justin.

'Happy birthday,' said Cassie.

'Would you like to sit down?' said Eliska, noticing as she said it the unlikelihood of being able to make good on the offer. 'Aah...'

'We'll stand,' said Justin.

'You must try the Bozkov though, while there is some left. I have been saving it.'

'You get back to your game,' said Aaltje. 'I'll take care of them.'

Aaltje made three rum-and-cokes, and tried in vain to reach Cassie and Justin in order to deliver them. A Swede and two Germans (all female) had entered the kitchen while she was busy, and standing room was now almost as rare a commodity as seating. Some people had squeezed into the pantry, while others were regurgitated back out into the passage.

'I'm going out on the bridge for a smoke, if you want to join me,' said Aaltje, handing them paper cups. 'It's getting a bit crowded.'

A door at the end of the passage led them onto a small bridge, the surface of which was covered in chicken wire. For when it gets icy, thought Cassie. They were now on the crest of the hill for which Hill Cottage had presumably been named, and the height afforded Cassie her first view of the establishment as a whole, or what could be seen of it in the near-darkness. Before them a set of steps had been cut into a dirt path that led down to the road, and beyond this was the tall brick schoolhouse, built on the level ground of the valley floor. Higher up to the west was another cottage, and lights much further away to the east indicated another. Beyond that the long dirt path they had come by curved away into the shoulder of the forest. As Cassie watched, lights began winking on here and there with a terraced effect.

Aaltje leaned her back up against the railings and lit a cigarette. Cassie and Justin leaned beside her. The wood had the chapped, malleable texture that comes of being soaked through once or a hundred times too often. They were now facing an empty moorland that stretched grey and even to a velvety strip of horizon, broken only by a few bushes that squatted like gargoyles in the mist. A gust of wind floated in off the field, tossing at them a cold, fecund smell of herbs and wet grass and lanolin, at once cultivated and wild. Cassie breathed in deeply.

'The air smells good here,' she said. 'In the moral sense.'

'Yes,' said Justin. 'Farm air always does. It's all that honest toil.'

'Which part is the farm, anyway?' said Cassie, thinking of the sheep they had seen on their way in. 'What belongs to whom?'

It's kind of a mish-mash,' said Aaltje. 'The livestock is the farmer's – his family lives in the farmhouse you passed on your way in, but the land is owned and managed by a trust. It used to be a boarding school, and before that it was a private estate... there was a Lord Kilgrey who took on a lot of school kids from London during the Second World War. But it's been what it is now for the last twenty years. A lot of the residents have been here since way back then, when the schoolhouse was actually still used as a schoolhouse.'

'You mean this used to be a centre for children?' said Cassie.

'That's right. It only turned into a centre for adults because the children grew up.'

'So eventually it will be a centre for senior citizens,' said Cassie.

Aaltje laughed. 'Probably. Ideally. If it manages to stay on its feet that long.'

'Speaking of livestock, where are the Carmichaels tonight?' said Justin.

'Chris is around, somewhere,' said Aaltje. 'Toby's coming along later.'

The door opened, and the man who had been wearing a bra put his head round. He had an unkempt goatie and humorous eyes. 'Coast's clear,' he said. 'They're finishing up downstairs. And just in time too; Milica wants us out.'

'Thanks, Martin,' said Aaltje. 'Just finishing my smoke. This is Cassie, Justin's step-sister.'

'Charmed.' He doffed an imaginary hat to her and disappeared back into the building.

'By the way, do you think Danny's still awake?' said Justin.

'I'm sure he is,' said Aaltje. 'Would you like to say hello quickly?'

'If I could.'

'Try and catch Ursula, or Per, and get them to help you find someone who's on duty.'

*Ursula. Per,* thought Cassie. *Eliska.* Martin and one or two others had been the only Scots she had heard amongst the barrage of non-Anglophone names and accents in the kitchen.

'Why is everyone here from out of the country?' she asked Aaltje once Justin had re-entered the house.

Aaltje shrugged. 'They advertise overseas for staff,' she said. 'I suppose it's not a very popular job amongst the locals.' She revealed her chipmunk teeth briefly. 'No-one wants to wash their own dirty laundry.'

They went back inside and through the first spring-loaded door. As they walked down the long hallway towards the stairs, a door a few feet ahead flew open, and Cassie was startled to see a figure burst into their path. She was startled more than anything else by the fact that the figure – a young woman, thin to the point of gauntness, with straw-coloured hair and close-set features – was entirely naked.

'Noooo!' cried the naked woman. A second woman now emerged, this one clothed and bearing a towel. A cloud of steam followed her out into the passage.

'Come on, Hattie,' said the second woman.

'Noooooah,' I doon't want i'l'

'Need help?' said Aaltje.

'We're fine,' said the woman with the towel. 'She doesn't want the iodine.'

Cassie now noticed that there were a series of angry scratches running down the forearms of the girl called Hattie, and a dull red stain of iodine across her hand. She was clutching at the doorknob of the door opposite, wailing, while her pursuer attempted to get the towel over her shoulders. 'Calm down, Hattie!' said her pursuer. Her pronunciation made it sound like "come down." Cassie guessed her for an Austrian. She was fumbling for a bunch of keys sticking half in, half out of her jeans-pocket. Aaltje stepped forward, taking out a bunch of keys of her own, and unlocked the door for her.

'Thanks,' she said, and they disappeared into the room opposite the bathroom. The silence as the door closed behind them was deafening.

'Sorry about that,' said Aaltje to Cassie. Cassie smiled in what she hoped was a reassuring manner.

Some effort had gone into tweaking the common room décor for the occasion: coloured light-bulbs, streamers, couches denuded of their cushions to create extra sitting-places against the walls. A coffee-table had been pushed to one side and laden with snack bowls and paper cups, and in its place a Scot who Cassie heard being referred to as Christopher was rolling out a Twister mat.

'Oh no,' said Martin, plonking down a pair of box-wines. 'Anything but Twister.'

'What do you have against Twister?' said Christopher. 'Twister is the sport of kings.'

'Twister is an outmoded artefact of the ideology of the nuclear family,' said Martin.

'What do you want to play? Russian roulette?'

'I want to get very drunk.'

'Feel free,' said Eliska. 'We'll play that the loser has to down a beer.' She knelt by the hi-fi and put on a CD of the Cafe del Mar school of thought.

'*Boa noite*, Silveira, long time no see,' said Christopher, and Cassie looked up to see Justin entering the room.

'Booyakasha, Master Carmichael,' said Justin. 'Ooh, Twister,' he said, spotting the mat. 'Have you played this before?' he asked Cassie.

'No,' she said.

'Want to give it a try?'

'No, thanks. I don't think so.'

Half an hour later, Cassie had her head buried in Toby Carmichael's armpit, her midriff resting on his back, her legs splayed, her underwear creeping up her backside, and it didn't matter, it didn't matter as long as she could get... her right hand... to that... yellow... circle. Toby was scrabbling for

purchase with his feet. He kneed her indifferently in the stomach as he fought to maintain his balance. Cassie's Achilles' tendons were stretched to breaking point. She groaned, and she stretched, and she prevailed, and Toby collapsed to the mat beneath her.

'Local Peasant Boy Doowwn!' cried Martin. The onlookers cheered. 'Six rrrrounds!' Cassie leaped to her feet and raised her arms in victory.

She had spent the last forty-five minutes similarly entangled with a variety of perfect strangers of both genders, and to her surprise, it appeared that she was unbeatable. Drink! Drink! Came the chant. Toby drank, drank.

As there appeared to be no more contenders, Cassie at last forsook the Twister mat and collapsed next to Justin on one of the couch cushions. He handed her a beer and toasted her string of victories.

Someone changed the music. A few people cheered as the first track came on. Justin raised his beer dutifully.

'What's this?' said Cassie to Justin.

'Vicious Spiral,' said Justin, having trouble with the sibilants.

'Should I have heard of them?' Almost everyone in the room was singing or humming along in a variety of keys with the husky female voice that was emanating from the stereo.

'Not yet.'

'Huh?'

'You will if you hang around with us.' He gestured with his eyes. 'I believe you're being challenged.'

Cassie looked up to see Aaltje on her feet. 'It's my right to defend my title as house champion' she said. Foreboding 'oohs' were sounded.

'Are you up for it, Cassie?' said Martin.

For an answer Cassie rose to her feet. The audience hoo-hooed.

'So be it,' said Martin gravely. 'Hitherto Undisclosed Relative of Token Dago versus Resident Skanky Dutch Chick. Places, please.' He spun. 'Left foot grrrrreeeeenah!' he announced.

They each placed a foot. Martin spun. 'Left hand bluuueeah!'

They crouched, their eyes locking. Cassie chose a circle farther away than necessary. Her plan was to occupy as much of the centre of the mat as possible, consigning Aaltje to one inhospitable corner. Aaltje stretched towards her left so that most of her body was along one side of the mat with one non-bearing leg in the green. 'Left hand yellloooooowww!'

So much for that manoeuvre, thought Cassie, returning her hand to the row of yellow circles. Aaltje reached out towards the yellow, her body now blocking Cassie's access to the centre third of the mat.

'Right foot blilllueeah!'

Aha. This was where it would begin to get interesting. Cassie brought her foot up beside her hand, while the other remained on the yellow circle where it had started, making her right leg and lower body an obstacle that Aaltje would have to cross to get to any of the red circles. Aaltje played safe, using the move to stabilise herself.

'Right foot, rrrredah!' said Martin. Cassie smiled. She was where she wanted to be already, so she merely moved her foot one square further out to give Aaltje further difficulty in redistributing her weight. Aaltje was beginning to sweat, she was sure. But with unexpected agility, Aaltje snaked her right leg underneath Cassie's body, so that her stomach faced upward. She was stronger than she looked. 'Sly,' Cassie muttered to herself.

'Right foot blueaah!' Cassie brought her leg round with some difficulty and ended up in the awkward butt-in-the-air position which she had come to think of as The Moon. She watched, dismayed, as Aaltje folded her right leg out and up and over Cassie's back, bringing it down *en pointe* on the blue circle. She had chosen the circle near the hand that was holding most of the weight of Cassie's top half. The audience egged her on. It's a psych-out, just a psych-out, Cassie told herself. Like putting her knight next to my king. Martin spun, then paused dramatically 'Left foot red!' he announced. The watchers gasped. Keep it together, thought Cassie. Stay focussed. She lifted her right hand and brought her leg underneath it.

'Foul! Foul!' called Christopher.

'What?' said Cassie.

'What did she do?' said Aaltje, whose head was still facing the ceiling.

'Rule number six: all auxiliary limb movements must be formally declared to the referee *before* they are initiated,' said Martin.

'You seem to know an awful lot about Twister for someone who doesn't like it,' said Justin.

'There's not much to do around here,' said Martin.

'I didn't know!' cried Cassie. 'It's not fair.'

'She's just a beginner,' said Justin. 'Have a heart.'

'Hurry up,' said Aaltje in a strangled voice.

'It's your call, Aaltje,' said Martin. 'I wash my hands.'

'I'll allow it. Just spin, for God's sake.'

'Right,' said Martin,

'Right *what?*' said Cassie.

'No, I mean okay, yes, roger, I hear and obey.'

'Martinnnn!' groaned Aaltje desperately.

'Left foot green!' said Martin.

No! Not left foot green! Cassie eyed the green row nervously. She could not get there without going between Aaltje's arms. She brought as much of her weight onto her own arms as she could. Her left leg was shivering. She stretched, overbalanced, and collapsed spread-eagled on the mat. The audience roared, and Aaltje fell on top of her. The Token Dago handed her her punishment, and Cassie downed it.

Justin smiled appreciatively. 'That was the last of them,' he said.

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None of it had been quite as she remembered; London from the sky, Yorkshire from a train, Edinburgh from a car window. But this part had no memory at all to answer to, real or constructed. Neither she nor Sam had walked here in her mind. This part she had not pictured, this place she had not guessed at; this solid night, these lights and distant laughing voices, the laughing voices that were their own, this candid predatory smile floating like a Cheshire Cat's beside her and the long drunken fingers enfolding her cold hand.

'This,' he said, facing his palm to hers so that it was natural and right that their fingers should interlock. 'Even this is dialogue. Especially this. Words have nothing on this.'

'I absolutely, absolutely agree,' she responded. 'Words are in fact obfuscation to real communication, not a vehicle for it.'

'As you say, an obsfuc... obfuscation. Yes.'

They were crunching along the gravel path that had been cut into the hill below the moor and falling over each other's sentences to get to the core of a revolutionary and immensely profound theory about human behaviour that they would both have forgotten by the next morning. But for the time being it was bounding forward in joyous leaps on the momentum of the beer and Czech rum singing through their veins, their mouths snapping smartly along on the same live wire. It soared to unimagined heights on the strength of Justin's out-stretched arm, reached new levels of coherence and lucidity in his vigorous gestures.

'So-called 'conversation' is just the lukewarm human version of what other animals accomplish through physical contact,' said Justin. 'To wit, bonding.'

'So my father and I should actually just butt our heads against each other?'

'Precisely. You are both scuppered by your enormous vocabularies. You sit there choking on five-syllable words and never get round to actually saying anything. It's not a personality clash at all.'

'Quite the opposite,' Cassie agreed disconsolately. 'A personality clash implies a dynamic of some nature.'

'I was thinking more along the lines of romantic relationships, though. That's why so much more conversation takes place when you're physically separated from your significant other. The voice on the phone becomes the substitute for the body; talk fills in for touch.'

Cassie thought of her journal; her futile cries across the abyss.

'This is also why one talks incessantly about someone that one is missing terribly,' continued Justin. 'You don't necessarily need to share all that information. But saying their name makes them nearer somehow; invokes them, like a djinn.'

And now she thought of Dr. Patel, how she had jabbered at him like a lunatic once she had found her stride. Justin was striking too close to home.

'Do you have anyone particular in mind?' she said.

'Me? No, no.'



'You don't have someone special pining away for you back at university?'

'Nobody special, no.'

'Anyone you have your eye on?'

'You're terribly nosy this evening.'

'Just interested.' They stomped onward for a few moments, aware of nothing much besides breaths and footfalls. 'Actually,' said Cassie, 'I had wondered if Aaltje and you...'

Justin laughed his booming laugh. 'Aaltje? No.' He laughed again, as if delighted at the idea. 'No. Aaltje and I are not, ah, desirous to have lain by each other.'

'Why is that so funny?' said Cassie, laughing herself.

'Because Aaltje bats for the other team, Cassie.'

Cassie stopped in her tracks. 'Are you serious?' she said.

'Quite serious. I thought girls were supposed to notice these things.'

They were on their way back to the upstairs kitchen to retrieve the last of the stashed beer, and had taken the outside route to avoid waking the housemother. Conversation stopped as they concentrated for a minute or two to climb up the dark and dew-clad bank to level ground. Now flush with the moor, Cassie turned to enjoy the view, expecting perspective, and found none. If there had been a wall six feet in front of her she would have been none the wiser, as long as it was painted black.

'So what are you really trying to say?' said Justin as they resumed walking. 'Do you want the job?'

'What?' She turned towards him.

'There's no reason why we shouldn't, you know,' he said. 'We're not really family.'

'I know.'

'Then why not?' There was laughter still behind his voice. There had been none behind hers.

They were back at the bridge now. Cassie tried to laugh, to maintain it as a joke. She disengaged her hand from hers and beat him suddenly on the back with an open palm, once, twice, as if he were choking.

'What was that for?'

'Oh, you know. Just a friendly pat.'

'If that's what you consider a friendly pat I'd hate to find out what an unfriendly pat is like.'

'Sorry.' She folded her arms over the railings, blowing on her hands.

'The fire will go up soon,' said Justin, watching her.

'Oh good.' How could he have said such a thing? He *knew* about Sam.

She squinted into the darkness. A smudge of contrast had caught her eye; something spectrally pale moving slowly over what might be the ground in what was probably the distance. 'Is this place haunted?' she said.

'Very likely. Why?'

Cassie pointed, and he peered out towards the fleck of movement, which was now either growing or coming towards them. As they watched, the ghost flopped down gracelessly and commenced rolling back and forth.

'Hm,' said Justin. 'It's probably just Gandalf.'

'Oh, silly me. Of course. I didn't know he liked to roll about in wet grass.'

Justin laughed. 'No, really, there's a big horse called Gandalf, belongs to the Carmichaels, has the run of the place. The others are kept in at night, but he's got out so many times they stopped trying.'

'And I suppose you named him that yourself?'

'No, not me. That's his name. Shall we go say hello?'

'To the horse?'

'Yes, to the horse.'

'I don't like horses much.'

'You still haven't answered my question.'

'Which question was that?'

'You know which.' He was joking, she was almost sure. He just didn't get it. Some people would never get it. Not her mother. Not even Mia. She had to remember that.

'Oh...' She breathed out through her nose, producing a long nasal sigh, and tried to think of a flip response. 'You're the only big brother I'll ever have in this world. So let's rather not get carried away.'

He matched her pose against the bridge rail. 'What if we can't help it?' All his words still spoken with that chuckling undercurrent, like chevron tape around the scene of a crime.

Maybe this is just what people are like over here, she thought.

And then: *maybe this is just what people are like*. She couldn't remember. Perhaps she had been like this, once. Perhaps everything had been a joke and a game to her too, and she had forgotten.

'You can always help it,' was what she said. 'We just fool ourselves into thinking otherwise, because removing choice is the same thing as removing accountability. There is, inevitably, a moment when you give yourself permission.' That hadn't sounded very flip.

'You are far too practical, Cassiopeia,' he returned.

'Cassie, please.'

'You don't like your name?'

'I don't dislike it. It's just a little ridiculous to be saddled with a name like that when your surname is something as mundane as Harris. I've lived with the sniggers all my life.'

'If you ever become famous, you could drop the surname altogether.'

'Ha. What would I conceivably become famous for?'

'I don't know. Juggling.'

'Juggling, I see.'

'It sounds like the name of a mystic, actually,' said Justin. 'A what-do-you-call-it, a medium. Someone with a crystal ball and hoop earrings. You could have your own TV show. Commune with the dead.'

She heard his voice catch on the last word, pretended not to notice. Yes, she thought. Well done. You're catching on. 'That's the thing,' she said. 'It's one of those loopy New Age names. It makes me sound like I'm the spawn of unrepentant flower children.'

'Strange, now that you mention it. Your parents don't seem the type.'

'They're not. It was my father who chose it. He says it symbolises the triumph of empiricism over blind faith and superstition.'

'Goodness me,' said Justin. 'What on Earth would he have called you if you were a boy?'

'Nothing on Earth, that much is certain.'

'So how does it symbolise the... what you said?'

'Well,' said Cassie. 'There was this man named Tycho Brahe. A sixteenth century astronomer.'

'Heard of him,' said Justin. 'Didn't he have a nose made out of gold?'

Cassie smiled. 'That's right, he did.'

'So?'

'So one night he spotted a new star in the constellation of Cassiopeia. It's quite famous.'

'Pity about the clouds, or you could have shown me.'

'No I couldn't. It's gone now.'

'It's gone?'

'Well, no longer visible to the naked eye. You see, it wasn't actually a new star. It was an old star going nova. Dying. Which of course is the mistake that gave us the term, 'nova'. They call that kind a Type Ia Supernova, when one star in a binary star system, a white dwarf, leaches energy from its companion star until it collapses under its own mass. After the explosion it faded away. It didn't even happen when he saw it, either. The light from the explosion took over seven thousand years to reach the Earth, so it was old news by that time, if only he'd known.'

'Doesn't sound like a terribly auspicious discovery so far,' said Justin.

'But it was,' said Cassie. 'It proved that the universe is not something eternal and constant and immutable, which is what had been assumed up until then. Ever since Aristotle.'

'Oh, right.' He nodded sagely. 'How?'

'If one star could be born, or die for that matter, then it follows that they all had a beginning and an end, and so, by extension, did the whole kit and caboodle. The whole universe,' said Cassie. 'The science of the day had to go back to the drawing board and start from first principles, taking nothing for granted.'

'Hmm.' He was silent then, and she thought she had been right in assuming that he hadn't really been listening. But his next words proved her wrong. 'I guess that's what it takes for some people to face the sad truth,' he said.

'Which sad truth would that be?' said Cassie.

Justin shrugged. 'Nothing lasts forever. I didn't need to see a star exploding to discover that much.'

'You're lucky,' said Cassie. 'I learned it the hard way.'

'So did I, if it comes to that,' said Justin. 'Maybe not *the* hard way. But a hard way.'

From inside the building, they heard a chant go up: Six! Five! Four! Three! Two! One!

'Ah,' said Justin. 'We missed it.'

'Happy new year,' said Cassie as the first drunken strains of Auld Lang Syne sounded reedily from the other end of the house. Accompanied, to Cassie's surprise, by an actual bagpipe. She was even more surprised by the thrills the music sent chasing up her spine.

'Lang may yer lum reek,' said Justin. He opened his arms, they hugged, he slapping her on the back in revenge, so hard that her ribcage shook within her. She laughed, and reciprocated, upping the ante – she had always been strong in the arms – and he gave her a proper clout, until both of them were laughing and in more pain than they let on. Shouts and whoops sounded clearer as the house emptied out into the night. Whoever was playing the bagpipes missed a couple of notes.

'First footing,' said Justin.

'They'll be needing you.'

'Me?'

'You're dark.'

He drummed both hands on the railings. 'I'll go see about that beer then, shall I. One should come bearing gifts.'

He crossed the bridge and pushed open the back door. A moment later the kitchen light came on. Suddenly there was contrast to the world, depth, shape, even the odd brave splash of colour. In the moor beyond, the horse called Gandalf stood perfectly still with its head turned towards the east.

Cassie leaned back, tucking her cold hands into her armpits and swaying whimsically from side to side to counterbalance the swaying of the Earth. She should be more forgiving; she would have to learn to have patience here. She could no longer expect the words 'how are you' to be followed by the inevitable 'holding up.'

And that's why I left, isn't it, she said out loud to no one.

Nothing lasts forever.

It was all there, she thought, as Justin re-emerged, beerladen. Encoded in light, that heady news coasting ever-constant over the course of the millennia to strip our existence of all we thought we knew, all the truths we held to be self-evident imploding in a mute celebration of transience; the silent swansong of the body electric, the birth of uncertainty in the death of a star. And yet we each have to learn it all over again, the hard way.

'Are you drunk?' said Justin, looking at her with an amused frown as she stumbled three and a half feet down the bank that edged the moor and landed on her knees in the grass, which was thankfully lush and forgiving.

'I never get drunk,' said Cassie.

## Full Wolf Moon

She turned to protect her eyes from the smoke and flying ashes and her eyes fell on their shadows leaping out rampant before them, hers and Justin's, connected now at the head, now at the hip. A smell of kerosene, and the bonfire roared.

Those residents who had requested it had been allowed to stay up, or had been woken, for the fire. Cassie spotted the girl she had last seen naked, calm now, and very close to the flames. Cameron was there too, and several others whose names she had yet to learn. The boy – she supposed she should call him a young man – called Danny, was seated cross-legged a few metres from the fire, on the cold grass, the attention of his whole being focussed on some sort of stuffed animal which he held in his lap.

Behind her, Justin flailing like a Catherine wheel, catching the logs tossed to him by strapping Chris Carmichael, who was, in between throws, catching the logs thrown to him by his equally strapping younger brother Toby.

There were people throwing things on the fire that don't look like regular kindling. Folders full of paper, letters, some clothes, a CD. Aaltje cheered when Eliska threw into the flames a framed photograph, glass and all.

Catharsis as spectacle, thought Cassie. It just didn't work unless someone was watching.

'I didn't bring anything with me,' she said to Justin, and she must have sounded distraught, or embarrassed, because he smiled a kind half-smile, and said, 'That's okay.'

She thought again of the article in the Sunday Times, and changed her mind about who had got the press in on it. She thought now that she understood why Dianne had done it. It was not about demonstrating forgiveness at all. It was about something a couple of millennia older than grace.

She turned to find Danny next to her, holding the stuffed animal – it was a floppy-eared dog – by the foot.

'That's a nice dog,' said Cassie. 'What's his name?'

Danny angled his jaw towards her. Now that he was on his feet, she saw that they were of a height, and she found him looking at her strangely, out of the corner of his eye. 'Where's Sam?' he said.

She was surprised, first, by his words, and then, by the broad and earthy lowlands intonation, the trilling 'r'. For some reason, she hadn't imagined him to have this accent. The voice itself was neither

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broad nor earthy, but dreamlike, soft, and high, just a notch above a whisper. His shadow stretched out before him like a giant's.

'I don't know, Danny.'

We are in Plato's cave, she thought.

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At five p.m. on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of January, the peak night of the Quadrantid meteor shower, Cassie cast a mildly curious glance to the skies of Edinburgh and thought there would be even less of the typically economical display to see than usual. The clouds that had been grazing the horizons like placid skybound cows earlier that day had reconstituted themselves into an oppressive tungsten-coloured sheet that lay low across the city, turned livid pink at sunset, and shortly afterwards, began weeping.

By eight, when she accompanied Justin to his place of work, the rain was coming down such that to speak was to drink. Inside Quigley's, films of ripe steam clung to the windows, and all scents were emulsified.

The crowd was mostly young. They, like Cassie, had come to watch a performance by Vicious Spiral.

'One of the band members is a good friend of mine,' Justin had told her. 'I'd like you to meet him.'

'But you'll be working,' said Cassie. 'And I'll just sit by myself feeling spare.'

'No you won't,' said Justin. 'Aaltje will be there, and probably some of her colleagues too. We're all fans.'

Either the rain or the coming musical event had clearly released some brooding psychotropic force in the patrons. To the right of where Cassie was sitting, a man in tears was being hugged fervently by a woman in tears. When she had had her go the man turned round and embraced another man, who, if not yet actively crying, was certainly trembling about the lips. At the next table a group of girls were speaking in excited tones with their heads bowed together. There was nothing frivolous about their mood; they seemed to be discussing something of great moment and great joy, like the immanent return of Aslan. Across the room a man and a woman were gazing at each other wordlessly, with an intensity and focus and complete lack of artifice that ennobled their otherwise homely faces. Did nobody else notice it? she wondered. Or had Justin put something in her drink?

Cassie looked across at Aaltje, Martin and Eliska, just to make sure that somebody in this room seemed less than ethereally human, and was reassured to see that their faces betrayed nothing more than the kind of contented boredom that comes of sitting in a familiar dive with familiar people, having accepted that it is too loud to talk comfortably.

'What are you staring at?' said Aaltje.

'All the emotional people,' said Cassie, waving a hand towards the bar area. 'Is it just me? What's up with them?' She felt distinctly as if she were missing out.

'They're Scottish,' said Martin.

'I didn't know the Scots were known for their demonstrativeness,' shouted Cassie.

'No,' said Martin, shouting over the noise. 'But we are known for our whisky, and it all comes to the same in the end.'

The current racket was being generated in equal measures by the warm-up act for Vicious Spiral and the crowd of moshers around the stage, who were yelling along atonally to the U2 covers the band was belting out. Cassie had noted from the poster outside that they called themselves U3.

Justin himself was of course behind the bar, bestowing his splendid smile on the customers right and left, as if scattering largesse to the populace. Currently he was leaning over to speak to a trio of cankled girls in skirts, and as Cassie watched he threw back his head and laughed, his wolfish canines glinting potently. Simultaneously he pushed with both hands away from the bar and propelled himself in an compact spin towards the cash register, where he stood making change, his shoulders keeping time with the music.

'Oh, look at him, being adored,' said Aaltje, rolling her eyes. Cassie would have liked to roll her eyes in return, but she couldn't really pull it off. It was the first time she had seen him in what was clearly his element. Catching her in the act of watching him, Justin flashed her a feral grin and winked. She smiled back, but the gesture irritated her, relegating her as it did to the status of the general audience to his charms, rather than singling her out as someone apart from it, as was no doubt intended.

'Don't worry,' said Aaltje. 'It's all an act. He doesn't know how to turn it off.'

So she thinks she has us figured out now, thought Cassie. 'Do you all know the band?' she said to the table at large. 'Vicious Spiral, I mean.'

'Yeah,' said Martin. 'Well, we're mostly friends with the lead singer.'

'Do they play rock?' said Cassie, who couldn't remember much of the CD she had heard at New Year's, nor much else about that evening.

'Indie rock,' said Eliska.

'But they're doing an acoustic set tonight,' put in Aaltje.

'I thought it was folk punk,' said Martin.

'You can be indie rock and still be folk punk, actually,' said Eliska.

'It's not folk punk,' said Aaltje. 'It's antifolk.'

'How do you know?' said Eliska.

'Because I asked Susannah,' said Aaltje triumphantly.

'Susannah?' said Cassie.

'The lead singer.'

'The singer is a woman?'

'Aye,' said Aaltje. 'Is that surprising?'

Cassie smiled to hear the Scots affirmative falling from her Dutch lips. 'No,' she said. 'But Justin made it sound as if his friend was a man.' She glanced back towards the bar at the sound of glass breaking. Justin was smiling at the mess he had evidently just made all over the bar.

'He probably meant Rex,' said Aaltje. 'The guitarist. All three of them were at uni together. But it's Susannah we know best.'

The name 'Rex' had featured somewhere in Justin's reticulated exposition of his Edinburgh life, but Cassie was pretty sure there had been no mention of a Susannah.





sassy, undulating riff, picked up and elaborated an octave up by the lead guitarist. The audience's ecstatic cry of recognition was echoed by Cassie's three companions, and Cassie felt her standing as outsider instantly compounded.

Then, to yet another paroxysm of adulation from the audience, Susannah Shaeck started singing.

The last time Cassie had heard that husky voice she had had her behind in the air and her arm between Aaltje's legs. Now in a more suitable frame of mind to pay attention, she was impressed by its range and power. The melody was complex, with lyrics that seemed to stuff in two radical feminist concepts to every beat. Only the most devoted fans managed to keep up with her, but the vast majority of the audience chimed in when the wordy verse emptied out into the relief of a simple, meaty chorus. As it ended, a plaintive wail of strings answered Susannah's voice from the other side of the stage, and Cassie noticed that the bass player had exchanged her guitar for a violin.

*Maybe it's a sin to confess*

*To anything less than perfection*

*Maybe it's a case of contempt (sang Susannah)*

*are you exempt from the quest for redemption?*

Cassie found herself swept up in the music, and by the third chorus she was singing along gamely, filling in the gaps with the kind of universal verbal doodles that are used to this end at concerts the world over.

'Do you want to go closer?' said Aaltje in her ear.

'Maybe it's a nuh nuh nuh NUH... Sorry? What?'

'Do you want to go closer? Dance?' She gestured with her head towards the area in front of the stage. Cassie shrugged, and they left their seats as Susannah belted out the last refrain.

*Maybe you're a Dorian Grey*

*and I pay for your country pleasures*

*Maybe you're a Jekyll and Hyde*

*and I'm the monster inside*

*Maybe you're just trying to survive*

*and I drive you to desperate measures*

*Maybe we're Bonnie and Clyde*

The applause started before the last sung note had even reached its zenith, let alone faded away. Susannah rewarded the room with a brief smile, before launching straight into the next number.

The rest of their songs departed from the Angry Young Woman model. There was a lot of Generation X stuff, but without the usual nihilism, and a good deal of anti-American Imperialism stuff, but without the usual self-consciousness. The lyrics were peppered with barbed sideswipes at all

manner of social and political institutions, and Susannah delivered them in a way that made the audience feel that they were part of a perceptive, forward-thinking elite, and she their leader. It was impressively done.

At the end of the first set, Justin appeared alongside the stage. He was holding an unopened bottle of water in one hand.

The guitarist called Rex, who was dressed in a tank top, chequered trousers and a racing scarf, and looked as if he cut his hair with garden shears, stepped over and bent down to shake hands with him. Cassie noticed that Justin kept the bottle of water lowered during this exchange. Then Susannah spotted him. Coming over to the side of the stage, she hunkered down to greet him, and he handed the bottle of water up to her as if it were a bunch of congratulatory roses.

Oh dear, thought Cassie. Even from this distance it was clear how the diffused charm he had exuded earlier was now concentrated and focussed like a laser-beam upon this one object.

'Old flame?' she said to Aaltje, mostly in jest. But Aaltje nodded.

'Serious?' said Cassie.

'Not sure,' said Aaltje, misunderstanding her turn of phrase. 'It seemed to go on for a while, but we weren't really told much.'

"We?"

'Oh, you know...everyone,' she said, flapping a hand towards the table where Martin and Eliska sat.

Justin was now bobbing through the crowd towards them, his face gleaming with sweat. 'Enjoying the show?' he said when he had reached them.

'They're great,' said Cassie. 'That girl can certainly sing.'

'Yeh, she's amazing' said Justin, lowering his eyes modestly, as if the compliment had been directed at him. 'They're too big to be playing a venue like this, really. Or they will be soon. I think they're doing it mostly for old times' sake. They used to play here quite a lot when they were nobody. Anyway, she says you should all come backstage afterwards and have a drink.'

'Backstage?' said Cassie, looking dubiously at the stage, which to all appearances was backed by nothing but solid concrete, with a curtain slung over it like an apology.

'Turn of phrase,' said Justin. 'I mean upstairs, in the VIP section.'

The second set ended at about midnight.

'Now,' said Susannah into the mic as the applause died down. 'Since we're all friends here...' (she was assaulted by whistles and cheers) 'and since this night is all about nostalgia for bygone days...' (further applause) 'I hope my good friend Justin Silveira will oblige me...'

'Oh God,' said Justin. 'She promised me she wouldn't.'

'... if I invite him to come and join us in closing this performance.' She smiled evilly in Justin's direction. Justin shook his head emphatically, to whistles and cat-calls from the crowd. Susannah nodded in response, smiling. 'It's not a request, Justin,' she said into the mic.

'Come on, Justin Silveeeirrrrra,' said Aaltje, gracing his surname with even more r's than Susannah had. 'You'll have to now.'

'All right,' said Justin. 'Okay. All right.' Hurriedly he unknotted his waiter's apron and approached the stage, making hurried starbursts with his fingers to warm up the joints. The moment he stepped in front of the crowd he adopted a showman's swagger, all trace of nerves leaving him. Susannah handed him her guitar, and he swung the strap over his shoulder with exaggerated resignation. Cassie saw him exchanging a few words with Rex and the other band members. Then, to her surprise, Susannah relinquished the centre mic to him too, stepping over to Rex's.

Even to Cassie's ear it was obvious that they had played together before, and often. The song was in a classic blues rock style, refreshingly different from anything they had heard that evening. Behind the good-natured humour with which Justin hammed up his performance, Cassie could hear the quality and nuance of his voice. His tone was brash and gravelly, his intonation beguilingly indolent. The guitar seemed for the most part to be playing itself. He handled it with a virtuoso's sprezzatura, paying his hands no attention until he took over lead from Rex for the solo, at which point the concentration of his entire being seemed to be channelled into them.

Susannah, who had been singing backing vocals up that point, now stepped back with a modest smile as Justin and Rex passed the solo back and forth to the crowd's voluminous approval.

'You look shocked,' said Aaltje, amused.

'He sounds like Sam Cooke,' said Cassie.

'You've never heard him?'

'No. I don't think I have.'

When the song finished Justin accepted the applause with a Margot Fonteyn curtsy. He shook his head and shielded his face with his hands under the onslaught of cries for more. When this drew yet more demanding cries, he did a little pantomime of looking surprised at the time on his non-existent wristwatch and yawning. Then he left the stage and ducked behind the bar, pretending to hide. The crowd laughed and Aaltje laughed and Susannah laughed and Cassie laughed too, accepting as graciously as she could that Justin belonged to everyone. Everyone.

The VIP section, as it turned out, was a box of a room off to the far end of the L-shaped second floor, the rest of which was occupied by a second bar area. Following the others into a space filled with plastic furniture, musical equipment, assorted bottles of alcohol, paper cups, the odd unbroken glass, and volumes of smoke, Cassie found herself momentarily confused by the inexplicable impression of having entered a bakery.

'Ah, come in, gerrls, come in come in,' said a beefy, bald man Cassie recognised as Vicious Spiral's drummer. 'And the lads too, if they must.'

'Um,' said Justin, looking around at the conspicuous lack of available seating. 'Let me see if I can organise some more chairs.'

Before he could leave he was accosted by Rex, who turned from his conversation and slapped Justin on the shoulder. 'So, my rusticated compadre,' he said. 'How is the idle life treating you? Are you running to fat?'

'Doubtless,' said Justin. 'And enjoying it vastly.'

'I hear interesting things, Silveira,' declaimed a voice from the other end of the room. Cassie had not spotted Susannah, sitting in the corner atop the wooden table under which most of the equipment had been stuffed. Her long back was tucked into the join and her short legs were folded beneath her. She was holding a cigar in one hand, the arm crooked above her head and resting in the right-angle between the two walls. Cassie noticed that she was now barefoot – the ugg boots on the floor in front of her with her socks stuffed into their mouths – and that her toenails were painted cherry red.

'Do you, Susannah,' said Justin, turning to face her.

'I hear things of a questionable nature.'

'I deny everything.'

'So your academic career continues apace then, does it?'

'Well no. That much is true. I have taken an extended leave of absence from the hallowed halls of Edinburgh University.'

Susannah took a puff of the cigar. Cassie placed its scent as vanilla, and at the same time she realised that it was this that had prompted the association with cookies and scones.

'You seem to be fairly philosophical about it,' said Susannah. Cassie could not help but admire the magnificent triphthong her lowlands brogue made of the second 'o' in 'philosophical'.

'What's the use of complaining?'

'Laudable outlook,' said the drummer.

'Thank you, Bruce.'

'Rumour has it that you had something of a difference of opinion with one Professor McKenna,' said Susannah, resolutely provocative. Justin gave her a glance that said 'shut up' as clearly as if he had spoken the words aloud. Susannah, however, seemed in no mood to allow her fun to be spoiled by something as inconsequential as discretion. 'Rumour has it,' she continued, 'that Professor McKenna's Mercedes Benz came off second best in the aforementioned altercation.' *Merrrceeedes Bayenz*, Cassie repeated to herself.

'Come on, Susie,' said Bruce. 'Leave a man be.'

'So is there to be a duel?' said Susannah. 'Pistols at dawn?'

'I'm going to get some more chairs,' said Justin with finality, and left the room.

Aaltje, Martin and Eliska now formed a knot around Susannah at the other end of the room, leaving Cassie standing alone. The drummer, Bruce, caught her eye and smiled broadly. She smiled back, and then looked around hopefully for something to sit on. Bruce leaned forward and tapped her arm.

'Lassie,' he said in a stage whisper. 'I don't mean to cause you embarrassment, but I strongly feel that someone should tell you...' – he motioned her closer- 'you forgot to put on matching eyes today.'

He laughed uproariously. 'Rex, have you seen the peepers on her?' Rex, who was talking to U3's frontman, swung around.

'Mother of God,' he said. 'That's insane, that is. Are they real?'

'No, it's an optical illusion,' said Cassie.

Rex peered closer, frowning suspiciously and swaying gently from side to side. 'Are you taking the pish?' he said.

'Now is that any way to talk to a lady, and a guest in our country?' said Bruce. 'Lassie, come and squeeze in here next to me, and pay no attention to that drunken skyhook.' He moved up to make room for her, and Cassie wedged herself delicately in the sweaty hollow between him and the man with the Jolly Roger t-shirt who had played the role of The Edge for U3.

'Who are you, anyway?' said Rex. 'Are you Justin's latest?'

'Rex, have you no manners at all?' said Bruce.

'I'm his step-sister,' said Cassie.

Rex's expression changed dramatically. 'An then your arse fell off,' he said, unexpectedly and incorrectly. 'Susie,' he called. 'Did you know this was Justin's step-sister?'

'Eh?' called Susie.

'This girl is Silveira's step-sister,' he shouted, pointing at Cassie with his thumb.

'Are you serious?' said Susie.

'What's your name, lassie?' said Bruce.

'Cassie,' said Cassie.

'Cassie, I hope you tell your brother that he's a disgrace to his poor family,' called Susannah. 'And to Edinburgh University, the Catholic Church, and humanity at large.'

'I tell him no such thing,' said Cassie, endeavouring to keep her tone jovial.

'Come over here, let's take a look at you,' said Susannah.

Cassie was mildly affronted at being ordered around in this way, but accepting that she was in Susannah's territory, she prised herself free of her two neighbours and went over to Susannah's perch, where she stood having smoke rings blown at her.

'He mentioned you once or twice, you know,' said Susannah after a moment's unhurried assessment.

'Funnily enough, he never mentioned you,' said Cassie.

Susannah smiled, unperturbed. 'Well it's nice to see you in the flesh. Have you been enjoying our wee town so far?'

Cassie was sorely tempted to ask her outright whether that was the magisterial plural, but happily Justin staggered in at that moment, bearing more plastic chairs. 'So far, I have,' said Cassie, and turned to help him distribute them. Justin placed his own chair in such a way that Susannah was beyond his line of sight, and patted the back of the one next to him to indicate Cassie should take it. The bass player with the dreadlocks, who Cassie had gathered was called Tanya, took the one on the other side of him and started talking in an attractively scratchy voice to Rex, whose conversation with

the pseudo-Bono was undergoing the natural progression into a jam session as Rex hauled out Susannah's acoustic to explain something musical. Bruce pressed a paper cup of something evil-smelling into Cassie's hand. 'Pu' heer on your chest,' he said.

'And why did you not tell me this was your step-sister?' said Rex, turning to aim a slap at Cassie's shoulder and succeeding instead in knocking Justin on the head with the neck of the acoustic.

'You never asked,' said Justin, rubbing his head. 'Tell me about your tour.'

'It were pure dead brilliant, weren't it,' said Rex.

"'Pure dead brilliant?'" Who have you been hanging out with, Rex?'

'Glaswegians, obviously. We slayed them over there. You should have come, Silveira.'

'Sorry I missed it.'

'But I'm ready to get back in the studio now. I've been experimenting, like. I have all these ideas.'

'Oh?'

Rex propped one knee up on the arm of Justin's chair and balanced the guitar on it. 'Listen to this, mate,' he said, and started playing something frenetic and edgy.

'Sounds a bit like Beck,' said Justin, moving his head up and down ruminatively.

'Jeff or Hansen?'

'Uh, Jeff.'

Rex beamed. 'Aye, I was going for a sort of a retro thing,' he said, still playing. 'But now imagine it over a dub beat, like. Dum duh duh DUM duh -'

'Rex,' called Susannah. Rex turned. 'I'm trying to remember the name of that bloke in Bristol, the stand-up comedian. The one with the cape.'

'Magic Gary,' said Rex.

'Magic Gary, that's right,' said Susannah, 'That bit about Michael Howard, how did it go?'

'You know how it went,' said Rex.

'I can't do the voice as well as you.'

'I'm busy, Susannah.'

Cassie was growing curious about the choreography of the gathering. There was a complicated set of tensions latticed from one end of the room to the other which she could not quite decipher. After having pranced about her like a puppy earlier, Justin was now ignoring Susannah to the point of actually, physically, turning his back on her. Somehow the group of people paying court to Susannah and the little huddle around Justin had become opposing forces; those redirecting their focus from one group to the other seeming to cross an invisible membrane. It was not lost on Cassie that all the members of Vicious Circle besides Susannah herself had one way and another arranged themselves around Justin, with Rex occupying the no-man's land between them. In the chess game that was evidently under way here, Cassie, the members of U3 and the Kilgrey contingent were mere pawns.

Sometime during the course of the next hour Susannah retrieved her guitar from Rex and commenced playing golden oldies. Everyone joined in the singing, and Susannah was in the limelight, where she evidently liked to be, and for a few minutes it seemed that the situation might have been

defused. By the time she got to *Stairway to Heaven*, something almost like camaraderie had been regained, with Justin and all the members of Vicious Spiral switching exuberantly to the backwards lyrics over the supposedly satanic section.

But it was not to last. When Susannah had finished the song, she took a sip from her drink, placed it down, and whispered something to Tanya, who drawled laughter in response. 'Here's one of your favourites, Silveira,' Susannah announced, looking at Justin. She began playing a sweetly melancholy intro that Cassie thought she recognised.

*Come over to the window, my little darling,* she sang. Across Justin's features Cassie now witnessed an extraordinary slow-motion display, as his expression moved from puzzlement, to pensiveness, to comprehension, to fury. The others in the room seemed oblivious, and Susannah herself was gazing maudlinly at the ceiling. When she reached the chorus, those who had not been singing along already burst into slurred accompaniment. Arms were slung around shoulders. Paper cups were swayed. Someone held up a lighter.

*Now so long, Mariaaaaaanne, it's time that we begaaaaaan  
to laugh, and cry, and cry, and laugh, about it all again.*

'Right,' said Justin to Cassie, the word scythe-like in her ear. 'Time to go.' He rose to his feet. 'We're off,' he announced to the room in general. Susannah stopped playing. 'Leaving so soon?' she called.

Justin looked at her, his eyes blazing. 'Yes,' he said.

'Aren't you going to give us a kiss, then?' said Susannah. Once again, she made no move to rise, but instead remained seated on the table in her Buddha pose and spread her arms for him to come to her. She might as well offer her hand like the Pope and be done with it, thought Cassie.

Justin smiled tightly. There was nothing for it. He crossed the room and allowed himself to be embraced. Then he collected Cassie by the elbow and together they left the club.

Justin loped along West Nicholson Street towards the car, whistling savagely and throwing his long limbs out before him as if they were scouts for his body.

'Slow down,' said Cassie. She was a quick walker herself, but was almost jogging in her efforts to keep pace with him.

He slowed down. They walked in silence for a while. 'Did you have a good time?' he asked at last.

'I did, thank you.'

'I'm glad.'

'Seemed a little tense there at the end,' Cassie ventured.

'I'm sorry about that.' He sighed moodily. 'It's been raining again,' he said.

The streets were indeed slick. Their feet threw up little swells of silver when they walked underneath a streetlight. The music must have drowned out the noise, thought Cassie. 'You were part of that band?' she asked.

'I was, yes, for a while. An earlier incarnation of it.'



'When you and Susannah were an item?'

He looked at her sidelong, then directed his gaze down the street again. 'Yes.'

'What happened?'

Justin laughed humourlessly. 'Creative differences.'

'No, really.'

'Well you've obviously guessed it already. Susannah and I split up, that's all. One of us had to leave.'

'Oh.'

'Anyway, it worked out well enough for them that we did. Susie is much more marketable as a frontman than I am. And they're hitting the big time now. They would never have got this far if she and I had stayed together. Or not so soon, at least.'

'There's no need for that kind of thinking,' said Cassie. 'I'm sure it's not *because* you left that the band became successful.'

'But it is, Cassie. In a roundabout way. Actually, no, in a pretty direct way. You remember the first song they played? *Dorian Grey*?'

'Sure, I remember it.'

'That was their breakthrough number, the song that got them airplay; that got them signed.'

'So what?'

'It's about me.'

'Oh!' she paused. 'Oh.' She was trying to remember the lyrics. They hadn't been very complimentary, as far as she could recall. It was certainly no love song. 'How do you feel about that?'

Justin shrugged. 'She wrote it a long time ago. It was a bad break-up. We're friends now.'

'You don't mind at all that she's up there insulting you before masses of screaming fans?'

'Not really. It's an occupational hazard. One has to take inspiration as it comes.'

'I see,' said Cassie, who did. His ego wasn't bruised at all. On the contrary, he was probably rather smug in the knowledge that he had inspired a hit song by an almost-famous recording artiste, regardless of its content. No young male could be insensible to this type of backhand flattery. *Still obsessed with me*, she could imagine him saying to himself in his most secret heart of hearts, each time he heard that song. *Poor girl*. 'Why did she call the song that?'

'I don't know. Jesus.' They had reached the car. Justin went through all of his pockets before he found the keys. He unlocked for her first, like a gentlemen, and once inside, she reached over to unlock for him, like a lady. He got in and put on his seatbelt. She waited for him to start the engine, but instead he said, 'I bet you want to know what I was suspended for.'

'What makes you say that?' said Cassie.

'You must wonder. You show quite astounding self-control in not asking.'

'Not really. It's just that I'm not particularly interested.'

'Of course you are. People are always fascinated by the sins of others.'

'So it was a sin, was it?'

'Oh, yes. According to the powers that be.'

'Which one? Greed? Sloth?'

'See. You are curious. I bet you think it was something terrible and shocking.'

'Was it something terrible and shocking?'

'It was love, Cassie,' said Justin. 'And no, there is not always a moment of when you give yourself permission.'

He stopped, staring straight ahead at the moist black street. She let him enjoy his moment of melodrama, for whatever it might be worth. She couldn't think of anything to say anyway, other than the obvious, and he would get to that in his own good time. He looked across at her, and she allowed herself to raise an enquiring eyebrow.

'As you heard, I had an altercation with a lecturer. Professor McKenna.'

'Something to do with a prank.'

'That's the official story.'

'What's the unofficial story?'

'I was sleeping with his wife.'

'You were doing *what*?'

'Sleeping,' said Justin, 'with his wife.'

Cassie took a couple of beats. 'Who is she?'

'She's one of my economics lecturers. *Was* one of my economics lecturers.'

'How many people know about this?' said Cassie.

Justin shrugged helplessly, appealing to an imaginary audience with his eyes wide. 'I didn't think anyone knew. But judging by what was said in that room just now, I can't be sure anymore. Susannah may have been bluffing. She loves to look like someone in the know. But then again.'

'Why are you telling me?' said Cassie.

'Firstly because, seeing as my bases don't appear to be as well covered as I thought they were, I'd rather you hear it from me than from someone else. And secondly because I'm going to ask you not to repeat anything you may hear to my mother or Alex, or anyone else, and I can hardly do that without letting you know what it is you're keeping secret. I don't think that would be fair.'

'I wouldn't have said anything anyway, if you'd asked.'

'Thank you,' said Justin. 'I guessed as much. But I... I'm sick of it anyway. I wanted to tell you.'

'So... what happened?'

'Do you swear you won't tell anyone?' he said, fixing her with an accusing stare, as if she already had.

'Justin, I'm not asking you to tell me,' said Cassie. 'Either do or don't. But make up your mind first whether you trust me or not.'

'All right. All right.' Justin leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes. 'I do.' He sighed. 'So you don't need to know the whole background.'

'Okay.'

'I was at hers one evening, and Professor McKenna came home unexpectedly.'

'Oh my God.'

'No, it's not quite as bad as that. We weren't caught. We were in the bedroom, and Marianne – Marianne McKenna, my... his wife, told me to just wait there until she could get rid of him.'

'Marianne,' said Cassie.

'Marianne, yes.'

'That song, in the room...'

'Yes, Cassie.'

'Sorry.'

'So Marianne went down to ward him off. I was stuck upstairs in the bedroom. I waited for about half an hour. Then I... had a call of nature. There was nowhere I could go. But there was an empty bottle of white wine next to the bed.'

'Oh, no.'

'Oh yes. So I did my business and put the cork back in. Then I heard them coming up the stairs, and I could hear her trying to divert him. I decided I had to make a break for it and jump through the window. But I still had the bottle to dispose of. I couldn't get out the window while I was holding it and I couldn't leave it there. So I decided to throw it over the neighbour's wall.'

'And?'

'And my aim was off.'

'Of course.'

'It went straight into the windshield of his car. You can imagine the consequences.'

'I'd rather not.'

'Don't laugh, it wasn't funny.'

'I'm sorry. It is funny.'

'Okay. Fine. It's funny. So like an idiot I started climbing through the window, hoping to get away before all hell broke loose. But he beat me to the bedroom. He thought I was an intruder, making off with the jewellery or some such, so he pulled me back into the room, and that's when the fight started. I didn't mean to hit back, I really didn't. It was just reflex. And please, please don't tell me that there's a moment when you give yourself permission for that too.'

'I didn't say a word.'

'He gave a lot worse than he got. And then she ran in and shouted my name, so I thought the game was well and truly up.'

'You thought?'

'Well, Professor McKenna said, you know this man? And she said I was one of her students. Then he asked me what I thought I was doing, breaking into his house. We both just kind of went along with that, although if I'd been thinking any clearer I might have realised that the implications of the lie were even worse. In the true version I was just an arsehole, this way round I was a criminal. But we'd been

so obsessed with not getting caught that that still seemed like the number one priority. And who knows, in her book it probably was.'

'How did you explain the, um, wine?'

'It wasn't easy. I said the whole thing was a joke; that I'd intended to put the bottle in the fridge. Student humour, you know.'

'He actually bought that?'

'Eventually, yes.'

'But then what about the windshield?'

'I said I'd chickened out when I heard him coming home, ran upstairs, and threw the bottle to hide the evidence. And missed.'

'I must say, I'm pretty impressed,' said Cassie. 'You can certainly think on your feet.'

'That's because I've left out all the parts where I was gibbering and mumbling and stalling for time.'

'Oh Justin,' said Cassie. 'I can't believe you got suspended over a bottle of pee. That's hilarious.'

'Well, destruction of property and breaking and entering, actually. I'm lucky he didn't mention assault too. I think he felt bad for having laid into me the way he did. He almost knocked my teeth out. If he'd known the truth I'm sure he wouldn't have had any such regrets.'

'So he still doesn't know about the affair.'

'Not to my knowledge.'

They were silent a moment. A bar of light moved across their faces as a car passed them. 'So... what do you think of your wayward step-brother now?'

'I think you got a lot less than you deserved, to be honest.'

'Yeh. I suppose I did. It was stupid and probably wrong. But I was very much in love with her. And she made her husband out to be such a miserable old bastard that I managed to convince myself it was justified. And then he was really quite decent about the whole thing, or what he thought was the whole thing, agreeing to keep it in the university and all. He could really have screwed my life up for me if he wanted to.'

'So you're going back?'

'I don't know. I suppose so.'

'You're lucky enough to be getting a second chance, Justin.'

'I know.'

'It's over between the two of you, I hope.'

'Seems to be. She wouldn't let me see her again after that happened. I guess it's for the best.'

'I'm sure it is. It's never a good idea to interfere in a relationship, much less in a marriage.'

'Of course, when you look at it like that.'

'Is there some other way to look at it?'

'From the inside rather than the outside. I really felt like it was beyond my control, you know?'

'I'm sure it *felt* that way.'

'I put it down to genealogy. Like mother like son.'

'Mm,' said Cassie understandingly, before realising that she did not, in fact, understand. 'I mean, what do you mean?'

'Well, just that I understand better now how these things happen. If any good came of it it's that I now see things from my mother's perspective. I hated her for a while, you know, for what she did, for breaking up our family. But when you're that wrapped up in someone...'

'You mean, that she left your father? That she divorced him?'

'Well, that too, but I was referring to before that. The affair.'

'Your mom had an affair?'

Justin looked at her with a baffled expression. He opened his mouth, closed it again, his dark irises roving from side to side. 'Well of course she did, Cassie,' he said carefully. 'With your dad.'

Cassie regarded him blankly. For a moment she thought he was going to burst out laughing and tell her it was a joke. Then she wondered whether he was employing some idiosyncratic British usage of the word 'affair' of which she was not aware. But as the seconds ticked by, and no such explanation seemed forthcoming, she was forced to conclude that what she had just heard was the simple, literal truth.

With no clear intention, she got out of the car again. She needed to stand. She needed air. Justin got out too, and they faced each other across the bonnet. 'I really...' said Justin. 'I really thought... How could you not know?'

'No one ever told me,' she said. 'No one told me anything.'

'Shit,' said Justin helpfully.

'How long?'

'I don't know exactly.'

'When did it start?'

'I don't know, Cassie. I'm sorry. I'd have to think about it. I was very young.'

'So think. How young?'

'About... I must have been five. I was five when she went overseas.'

'What? It happened overseas?'

'The first time, yes.'

Cassie sat down on the hood of the station wagon, then stood up again quickly, the seat of her jeans soaked. 'The first time?'

'They stopped. Then it started again a bit later, in South Africa.'

'Where overseas?' said Cassie.

'Here, actually.'

'In the U.K?'

'No, right here. In Scotland. They met at a conference here in Edinburgh.'

'A pathology conference.'

'That's right. So you do know how they met,' said Justin, confused.

'How, yes.'

'And you didn't ask where?'

'Justin, I was six. Pathology conferences happened on Planet Pathology Conference.' But had she really, truly, never, since then, wondered *when*?

'The conference was a matter of days, surely,' said Cassie. 'How could they –'

'My mother had taken a locum in St. Andrews,' said Justin. 'Six months.'

'When you were five,' said Cassie.

'Yes.'

'So I was four.'

'I suppose you must have been. Cassie, I don't want to –'

'Ssshh. I'm thinking.'

Justin turned away. A mob of chavs was passing down the street, whooping unintelligible comments and laughing their uh-huh-huh-huh laughter that was like a battle-cry in itself. Oi! Don't just stare at her, ye daft cunt! Yelled the foremost in Justin's direction. Put her in the back seat and bosh her! Uh-huh-huh-huh. Justin watched them pass by with his eyes lowered. If they were drunk enough, they were likely to pick a fight.

'We'd better get going,' he said to Cassie. 'It's late.' They got back in the car, and Justin started the engine.

'Sorry,' said Cassie. 'For interrogating you like that.'

'It's fine. I understand. It must all be a bit of a shock.'

'Justin...'

'Yes?'

'Did you say St. Andrews?'

'Yes, why?'

Cassie took a deep breath, in and out. 'Just checking.'

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*It was all me, Sam. All in my head. How do we do this to ourselves? Why is it so easy to allow one's imagination to compensate for the poverty of reality?*

*It's like the unicorn book. Or starlight, making its way to Earth over thousands of years. By the time you find out that all this time you've been deluded, the show's already over, it's been over for ages, and all you can do is painstakingly go through everything you thought you knew, cross it out, and start again.*

There was a soft knocking at the door. Cassie felt her shoulders tighten. Perhaps the look on her face had registered after all, thrown up a question mark as he lay in the dark and driven him from his bed again to seek her out and discover its meaning.

She had run into him in the hallway, as he stumbled sleepily across the passage between the bathroom and the master bedroom. His hair standing up in tufts, his eyes screwed up against the bathroom light. He had smiled wanly at her and mumbled an acknowledgement of her safe return before disappearing into the opposite room. For her part, she had not managed to say anything or even nod, expecting him to start guiltily as he crept marauding to his lady's chamber, as if it weren't his rightful place, now. But he had no idea of the wormhole she had passed through; that twenty years of blissful ignorance had been vexed to nightmare by a rock band, and in the moment she had to recover herself before the door closed behind him she hoped that the passageway had been too dark and he too sleepy to notice her face.

'Who is it?' she said.

'Only me.' It was Justin. That was all right. He stepped halfway into the room, hangdog, for all the world as if he was expecting to have a shoe thrown at him. 'Can I come in?' he said.

'If you like.'

He entered and stood at the foot of the bed with his hands on the foot-board. 'Are you all right?' he said.

'Yes, I'm fine.'

He did not know why his first thoughts upon seeing his step-sister in tears were of Marianne. A couple of months ago, when everything reminded him of Marianne, this would not have surprised him in the least. But now the thought was unwelcome, and somehow boorish, like a fart in a church.

What exactly does a brother do when his sister is upset? He wondered. Or a step-brother, for that matter? He had no experience of either; could barely conceive what differences might apply.

When he was little, his mother would sometimes start crying in the middle of one of his father's interminable tirades, and his father would trail off in mid-sentence with a sound like an animal groaning. Nobody could cry like Lynn Silveira. She looked more beautiful crying than she did happy, and her husband would always be defeated by it. He would approach with arms outspread, palms faced outward in surrender, engulf her stiffly resisting fine-boned frame in his, sink his big rough head into her neck, move his hands around her back and say hey, hey until she crumpled against him. Observing with interest from under the table and practicing the 'hey, hey' part under his breath, Justin concluded that a crying woman worked like a deck chair, that you have to press in the right places to collapse.

He had held women since then, a fair number of them, but the only ones who had ever cried in his adult presence had neither required nor desired his comfort. Cassie, for all the snail-trails of sorrow coursing down her face, seemed no exception. She was sitting upright and soundless on the bed, her eyes saturated, her face mottled pink and white, raising a hand now and again to stem the flow of

mucous from her nose with a wad of tissue. It was this, he realised, that had reminded him of Marianne. They were both silent criers. Or no, it was more than that. It seemed that just as there were women who become lovelier when weeping, there were others whose self-sufficiency was magnified by tears; who were less rather than more vulnerable when they bore this soggy armour-plating.

'You can sit,' said Cassie magnanimously, folding her legs away to make space for him. Justin sat.

'What's that, a diary?' he asked, looking at the battered black counter book lying open on the bed beside her.

'Sort of.'

'It's good to write down your feelings,' said Justin. He sighed. 'Or so I've been told.'

'I've been told the same.'

He swung his legs and bare feet onto the bed, so that they were facing each other. At pains to remember exactly what it was that he had wanted to say to her, Justin found himself troubled by an involuntary rumination on whether the tears from the brown eye tasted any different to the tears from the blue. He let it run its brief course, having long since ceased trying to curb the goings on of his inner cinema, refusing to be shocked or even interested, like a parent trying to break a child of the habit of throwing tantrums.

'Why do girls always hold a pillow?' he asked.

Cassie laughed thickly through the fug of secretions, glancing down at the pillow that she was indeed clutching to her stomach. 'I don't know. Do they?'

'Oh yes. They pick one up the moment they get home from work and take off their power suits.'

Cassie shrugged and laid the pillow aside, self-conscious of it now. 'I suppose it's a motherhood instinct.'

'So you don't think they do it to ward off men?'

'To be honest, I think it's just to keep my back straight when I'm hunched over a book like this.'

'Really? Does that work?'

'Try it,' she tossed him a pillow and he cradled it to his breast. 'Ooh,' he said. 'I feel all broody.'

How like his mother he looked, suddenly. The upper half of his face was Lynn's face, drawn in bolder strokes. And how very unlike her own mother Lynn looked, thought Cassie, wondering why her father had changed type so dramatically. It was an uncomfortable notion – one of several thousand uncomfortable notions she had uncovered over the last few hours – that her father should have a 'type,' when by the natural and right order of things her parents ought to have been bound exclusively to one another at least from their respective births, and preferably before that.

She could see Justin was working his way up to saying something, and pitied him a little. But it couldn't be helped, and she couldn't soothe him until he started, so she waited.

'I'm sorry for letting the cat out of the bag about... all that,' he managed at last.

'You're not to blame.'

'It can't be easy to find out now, after all this time.'

'Believe it or not, it's not even... that... that upset me. Not directly.'



'The affair?'

A pained expression crossed her features and Justin kicked himself mentally. 'Yes.'

'What is it, then?' he said, hazarding that he had been invited to ask.

'You know when...' Cassie stopped. She sat pensively for a moment. 'I had a book when I was little,' she began again. 'A picture book. It was about a unicorn that had been placed under a spell, and trapped on a carousel in a fairground. Until one day a little girl lifts the enchantment.'

'Yes?'

'One day I took it to school for show and tell, and I lost it. It was never found.'

'That's what's upsetting you?'

'No,' said Cassie indignantly, before she realised he was joking. She gave him a death-stare.

'I'm sorry,' said Justin, not so much contrite as unnerved. 'Go on.'

Cassie paused, gathering. 'Years and years later, and I mean as in the other day, just a few months ago, I came across that same book in my doctor's waiting room. It was in a basket full of old children's books. Not the exact same copy, obviously, but the same story, same edition.'

'That's nice,' he tried.

'At first, I thought so too. But as I looked through it, I was horrified. It was completely different from how I remembered it. The pictures were tacky. The writing was awful.'

'I've had similar experiences,' said Justin. 'It's one of those amazing aspects of being a child. Your head is so empty, and your imagination is so awesomely powerful, it builds on whatever it has to work with.'

'But I didn't just build. There were things that I discovered I had entirely made up. The way I remember it, the unicorn's name is Moonchaser, and when he's released, he ascends to the heavens and becomes the constellation Monoceros, and the stars speak to the little girl, saying "Maiden, thou hast delivered me from a cruel fate, and I am forever thy humble servant."'

'Sounds pretty advanced for a picture book.'

'In retrospect, yes.'

'What did he say in the real version?'

'He didn't say anything. He wasn't a talking unicorn. He just runs off into the forest. And he didn't have a name at all. It's a stupid thing to fret over, I know. But it bugs me. How could I have come up with all that stuff without even realising it?'

'Maybe you're a replicant,' said Justin, smiling.

Cassie started. 'What do you mean, maybe I'm a replica?' she said sharply.

Justin stopped smiling. 'Replicant,' he said carefully. 'Deckard. The unicorn... *Blade Runner*? No?'

'I haven't seen *Blade Runner*.'

Justin took this news in his stride.

'Sorry,' said Cassie. 'I'm just a bit touchy at the moment, I guess.' She closed the counter book. 'I took a trip with my dad when I was little,' she went on. 'During his sabbatical. Right before we went back to South Africa. It was a special memory for me. I thought we...' she laughed a little. 'I thought we

came all the way up here, all the way from London to Scotland, just to look at the stars. But now I realise that that was just an afterthought for him. An excuse, maybe, even. I was just baggage. He came to see your mother.'

'I'm so sorry,' said Justin, feeling responsible. 'Do you know that for sure? I mean...' He trailed off.

'I know,' said Cassie. 'I know. There are other things that make sense that way.' What made sense that way was too trivial-sounding to relate, but, she was sure. A memory of a door, and a skirt, and pair of legs in black stockings, and a long conversation going on three feet above her, the span of which she spent hanging from the end of her father's hand, tired and cold, her legs exhausted, wishing, with a frenetic sensory urgency that one never experienced in adulthood, that she could get the sand out of her shoes. She wouldn't have been able to locate the two memories in any kind of a spatiotemporal relationship were it not for that: she remembered clearly the desire, there at the end of her father's hand, trying to pry his fingers off one by one, to take her shoes and socks off and pour the sand out of them. They had just come from the beach.

He had picked her up to stop her from fretting, elevating her into the second tier of the world she occupied: child-height and adult-height. Adult-height was always more interesting: from there, one could see what adults were thinking.

'Why was that woman crying?' she said to her father when they left. Cassie had never before seen an adult woman cry, except in movies.

She did not remember her father's answer. But she remembered his face. Her nose started running afresh. Not her eyes, just her nose, as if she had at that moment come back from too long a swim in the ocean. 'And something else,' she said to Justin. 'All this time I blamed my mother. Not actively, not with resentment, but somewhere in the back of my mind I had formed the idea that it was her fault.'

'And now you feel guilty.'

'I did. But then it dawned on me.'

'Yes?'

'After she found out what had been going on, she left London. That's really why she went back to South Africa earlier than planned. They told me it was for business.'

'But that's understandable, surely,' said Justin. 'I wouldn't have wanted to stick around either.'

'She left me there with him, Justin. She *left me there*.'

Justin looked at her with an encouraging blank expression. 'Well he is your father, after all,' he said. 'It's not as if she'd left you with an axe murderer.'

How thick-headed, how endemically *male* of him not to get it. 'Don't you understand?' said Cassie. 'She left me there to remind him of his responsibilities. To keep him reined in. Like... like some sort of human chastity belt. It's obscene.'

'I'm sure there's an explanation.'

'There is. The one I've just given you.'

'Maybe you should talk to your mother...'

'I don't feel like talking to anyone right now.'

There was a pause. 'Are you, ah, going to say anything to Alex?' said Justin. There was a tentative note in his voice, and Cassie realised belatedly that this question was probably the real reason behind his little errand to her bedroom, at least in part. He was worried about being exposed for a rat, and this was his last chance to contain the damage in private. 'No,' she said, kindly. 'I really don't think there would be much point. It's ancient history to everyone except me.' And she could not resist adding, 'So you needn't worry.'

She could see him on the verge of feigning incomprehension, and was not in the mood for it, so she continued for her own sake. 'It's worse than losing something, finding out you never had it in the first place,' she said.

'Joni Mitchell in reverse,' said Justin.

Cassie laughed bitterly. She reached over for another tissue and blew her nose. 'This house,' she said.

'What about it?' said Justin, when it had become clear she did not intend to grace the sentence with a verb.

'I wish I weren't in it.'

'It will get better soon,' said Justin with authority.

'Sometimes I think it was a mistake to come.'

'Don't say that,' said Justin, suddenly fervent, his eyes flailing. 'You're just upset now, but, I mean, we *are* your *family*, you know. Even if it's not always easy, we've, well you and I, at least, we've had a good time so far, haven't we?'

His earnestness was enough to draw a genuine smile from her, and she wondered if it crossed his mind that not many nights ago he had, in his drunken designs, found reason to point out that they were *not* really family. 'I don't mean coming up to Edinburgh,' she said. 'I mean I'm not sure it wasn't a mistake to leave South Africa at all.'

'You'll be fine, you'll see,' said Justin. 'It will work out. Everything happens for a reason.'

Everything happens for a reason, thought Cassie. That had been another one of Sam's favourites.

Justin was looking down at his bare feet, crossed in front of him, and studying the dust he had tracked onto the counterpane. He rubbed at the marks with one hand, succeeding only in spreading them around. How very different he was, Cassie thought, and how much more likeable, in this barefoot persona, than in the one he had worn at the club earlier tonight. It served a purpose, she saw, but it wasn't real, and she guessed that no matter how well he had mastered that role, the showman, the ladies' man, the muso-about-town, it had been a strain for him to maintain so intense a version of it for those ten minutes on stage. But for all that, she said to herself, the boy can *play*. There was nothing strained about that part. 'I never got a chance to tell you,' she said. 'Your performance tonight was incredible.'

'Oh. Thanks.'

'Was that one of your own songs, or a cover?'

'No, that was ours.'

'It's very different to the rest of what they play. Vicious Spiral.'

'It wasn't Vicious Spiral when we wrote that,' said Justin. 'We were, well, the band I *left* was Scheherazade – total balls-up from start to finish, that was – although I can't be certain, I think that song might have come out of our Cu Sith days. Yes, I think it did.' He smiled. 'That was a good time.'

'It all sounds very glamorous,' said Cassie, who had not envisioned quite such a history as was hinted at in this abstracted moment's berry-picking from his past.

'Actually it was mostly very shabby,' said Justin, wistfully.

Shabby-glamorous, even more enviable. And he had excised himself from it. Cu Sith days. Scheherazade balls-up. You dig. She wondered if he was ever sorry. Then a thought struck her. 'Hey,' she said. 'Do you play any piano?'

'Not really. Not with any skill.'

'Do you think – could one play a piano piece on a guitar, at all?'

He snorted. 'In theory, yes. If it's written for one hand.'

'Oh.' She looked so deeply downcast by this news that he was moved to pity, and intrigued.

'How does it go?' he said. 'Perhaps I could work out a guitar version if you hum it for me. I'm not bad at that, I have a good ear.'

'I don't know how it goes,' she said.

'You don't know?'

'No.'

'Well, what's it called? I could try and find it for you online...'

She smiled miserably. 'I think I'd better explain myself,' she said, and, rising from the bed, she went over to the cupboard and took from her otherwise empty suitcase the large envelope that Ben Loudon had given her. She drew out the four sheets of paper and passed them to him. Noting that they were obviously precious to her, he took them as if he were handling the Dead Sea Scrolls.

'It's something Sam wrote,' said Cassie. 'My boyfriend.'

'Oh!' he said, understanding blooming on his features. 'He composed?'

'Yes.'

Justin laid the sheets out carefully on the blanket before him and studied the first page for some time, elbows on knees, both hands covering his mouth while the fingers of one tapped experimentally against his cheek, and every so often making little questioning musical noises in his throat. 'Sorry,' he mumbled after a few minutes had passed. 'I usually read tab, when I bother with paper at all. I'm slow at this.'

'More than I can say,' said Cassie. 'What are you smiling at?'

'Nothing,' mumbled Justin, and on second thought, explained: 'Only, he's quite the micromanager, isn't he?'

'How so?'

'He's given an awful lot of advice on articulation.' Justin had been puzzling, with amusement, over the plethora of neat Italian words, only a quarter of which were familiar to him. 'Didn't have much faith in his followers,' said Justin to himself, giving Cassie pause for thought. She had not thought of it this way before: the advice was not for written for his own hands to follow. Or was it? Might he have made these careful and exhaustive notes merely as a reminder to himself? It seemed unlikely. No, Cassie decided. Justin was right. This piece had been meant for other eyes. Further eyes. He had intended, or imagined, followers.

To Justin it was touching, this young man he did not know sending his music out into the world where he could not follow, and like a father seeing his child off to boarding school, leaping on his last chance to influence it, dispensing a life-time's advice all at once, telling it not to talk to sonatas, not to run with glissandos, never to play with crotchets, and warning anyone who will listen that it was allergic to staccato, that an eye must be kept on its G-Clef, and that it was sensitive about its coda. '*Con Meraviglia*', he read aloud, shaking his head in a gesture the aptness of which escaped his notice. 'Where does he come up with this stuff?'

'It means "in wonder"' said Cassie.

'I know,' said Justin absently. 'It's *meravilha* in Portuguese.'

'Oh. Right.'

'It's a flower, too, isn't it?' said Justin. 'The flower of St. Francis of Assisi.'

'I didn't know that,' said Cassie. 'Or, I knew it was a flower. Love-lies-bleeding. I didn't know about St. Francis.'

Justin looked from one page to another conclusively, and began ordering them. 'It's nice...' he began. This humble pair of words drew from her such a look of hope and awe that for a moment he was almost scared. 'Was he a professional pianist?' he asked.

'He was studying to be one. Or, he had just finished studying. We were going to come to London. He was going to do a Masters there.'

Justin nodded, unsure of how to respond. 'Let's go through to my room,' he said. 'If nothing else, I should be able to pick out some of the right hand; the melody.' He smiled. 'Enough for you to hum.'

He piled the pages again and rose, feeling more useful than he remembered feeling in a long time.

They crossed the dark passage into Justin's room, and Cassie sat down on his bed while her step-brother took down one of two guitar cases leaning against the wall. A pointy-eared Liv Tyler pouted ethereally at Cassie from the *Lord of the Rings* poster which hung above the desk.

'Cool poster,' said Cassie.

'Thanks. Nicked it from a bus-stop.'

He sat down on the floor with his steel-string under one arm and pored over the sheet music, plucking a note here and there with what seemed to Cassie like excruciating slowness.

Feeling intrusive, she scanned his bookcase for something to distract her from distracting him. Underneath the pile of textbooks that had been piled willy-nilly on top of the case, she discovered the broad paperback spines of row upon row of fantasy titles: the Sword of this, the Curse of that and the Return of the other; no less than six per author, and in some cases over a dozen. Cassie knew that, without exception, they would begin with a map, followed by an italicised section giving a synopsis of the Story So Far in an endless, sprawling saga covering generations of warriors and sorcerers and dukes and princesses, their sworn enemies, their lovers, and often as not, their domesticated dragons.

'So it's not just Tolkien, I see,' she said.

'Hm?' said Justin, looking up. Cassie nodded over to the bookshelf. 'Oh not by any means. Tolkien is a gateway drug.'

'Don't you find them rather... formulaic?'

'Utterly,' said Justin. 'And utterly satisfying.'

'Do you read anything else?'

'I like sci-fi.'

Cassie considered and dismissed the cracked backs of the *Dune* saga, the *Rift War* saga, and the *Hyperion* saga, and, settling at last on *La Morte d'Artur*, she pulled it from the shelf.

'That one's great,' said Justin.

'Well, at least it's set on good old Mother Earth,' said Cassie, and for the next half an hour she browsed with half an eye through the exploits of Arthur and Uther and the vainglorious Lancelot, desirous to have Iain by Guinevere, and the noble quest of Gawain and Perceval and good old Galahad, pure as the driven snow and true to the end.

'Okay,' said Justin. 'I think this is the gist of it.' He cleared his throat, even though he was about to play rather than sing, and as Cassie listened there fell from his hands the beginnings of a melody, a single, pure line, to which he added only bass notes and the odd power chord. To Cassie it was thrilling and maddening, listening to this pared-down version, trying in vain to imagine it fleshed out in the rolling voice of the baby grand. It was like only being able to see a shadow, and not the thing casting it, and yet for all that there was so much of Sam already in those sweetly searching notes, that she was not sure she could have borne more, and she thought with a thrill, you see, I do know his style. She held her breath until he stopped.

'That's all I've got so far,' said Justin.

He had only made it to the end of the first page. But there was, as he had promised, enough for her to hum.

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Around the time that Cassie was outside Hill Cottage telling Justin about Tycho's nova, Mia was standing in Trafalgar Square, where there were lions but no bagpipes, Matt's greatcoat tucked around her with Matt still inside it. They went home shortly after midnight, which left Mia feeling intriguingly old. They were becoming one of those boring we're-going-to-be-heading-home-now couples. She had never been half of such a couple before.

'We're going to be heading home now,' said Matt.

'Suit yourself, mate,' said Davy, with his arm around a drunken girl who, while blonde, was neither Sharon nor Camille.

It was too damn cold to be outdoors anyway. I bet Katrina's on the beach right now, thought Mia, walking the first two of the six blocks to the car on Matt's feet, facing him, like she used to do when she danced with her father.

She had spent Christmas with Helena in Tooting, while Matt joined his family in the North. Matt had invited her to come along, but Mia said no, she couldn't leave Helena alone.

'So bring Helena too,' said Matt.

'She has to look after Mr. Davenport,' said Mia.

Mia did not tell Matt that Helena had taken the week off.

'Why don't you go?' said Helena. 'I'll hang out with Tam and them.' Mia did not tell Helena that they had both been invited.

She could not have said exactly why she went to such efforts to avoid spending the holidays with her boyfriend's family. 'I'm not quite ready to be *that* sort of couple,' was what she told Helena. But this was not quite the truth.

In the end Matt had compromised, spending Christmas Eve in Tooting with the sisters and leaving early on the 25<sup>th</sup> for Hetton-le-Hole.

They exchanged gifts at six in the morning. He had given her a set of sable paintbrushes. She had given him the painting of himself.

'For your bedroom,' she said. 'There's nothing on your walls.'

'How can you possibly top your subject now, though?' he had said, to cover the tears pricking in his nose.

Mia laughed, but she had a good idea of exactly how.

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In 1996, the London fashion world was briefly and superficially shocked by the sudden and mysterious disappearance of Fillette Maddox from the midst of a successful career as a model, and, more to the point, from her position as one half of one of the most glamorous fashion power-couples of the quarter-hour.

In 2001, she had reappeared in the public eye, and with an efficiency that drew the brief but felicitous attention of the print media and the baffled admiration of her long-despairing father, she had reinvented herself as a business owner.

About the details, Mia had known little until now. Fillette, she was learning, talked very freely when she was naked.

'Do you want some tea, or anything?' she had said when Fillette arrived.

'Won't it bother you?'

'Not at this stage of the game.'

'Then yes, please.'

Careful not to stare, Mia had seen only moments, but already she was storing them, already planning. An ellipse of skin stretched between hipbones and ribs as Fillette lifted her top over her head, a tapering length of thigh, a shoulder blade steepled briefly as she reached back to unclasp her bra. As each garment was shed Fillette folded it and piled it on the counter. Busying herself with the tea, Mia noted in passing the practiced aesthetic logic with which the process was ordered. The outer layers were stripped off before the footwear, leaving the viewer, or voyeur, to gawk awestruck at the Eternal Feminine as God made her: resplendent in Victoria's Secret and spiked heels. If I were a man, and this were a bedroom, would she keep those on throughout? Mia wondered as Fillette loosened and kicked off the shoes. She took off her underwear and sat down elegantly on the couch, her startled nipples the only parts of her at odds with her equanimity.

'It's funny,' said Fillette, looking much less naked somehow now that the shoes were off. 'You avert your eyes, and yet soon you'll be staring at me for hours on end.'

Mia nodded. 'It's the same as massage. The actual nudity is not the awkward part. The awkward part is the transition from one state to the other. The undressing.'

'Or the getting dressed again,' said Fillette saucily. 'In my experience.'

Mia laughed and handed Fillette a mug.

'Do you want my hair down?' asked Fillette.

'Actually, I like what you've done with it today,' said Mia. 'Or at least, I like your earrings, and I need your hair swept up like that to show them off.'



Fillette was wearing earrings made from the tips of a pair of peacock feathers, and Mia thought the severe gaze of the iridescent eyes at their centres would offset the tranquillity of the piece nicely. She started taking polaroids, her mind already doodling freehand.

'Ooh, yes, Miss Bossy-Boots,' said Fillette delightedly, shifting her position according to Mia's instructions. Mia was already enraptured. Watching Fillette move from one pose to another was like watching caramel being spun.

But it was when Fillette lifted her face to the camera with a matinee idol pout that Mia was truly taken aback. It was the real thing. That pout that she, her sisters, and every other teenage girl had mocked in company and tried to perfect in private, Fillette's was the real thing.

'Is this is bringing back memories?' she said, a little awed. Fillette smiled in confirmation. The camera snapped up the smile and spat it out again in greyscale. With a softer focus, the shot could easily have graced the Pirelli calendar. 'Although I don't suppose you've ever modelled nude before.'

'All but. When I was young,' said Fillette.

'Really? I would think that would defeat the purpose of the trade.'

'Ah, Mia. Fashion has very little to do with actual clothes. The clothes are just there so that there's something to attach the pricetag to.'

'Of course. Silly me.'

'When I was sixteen, I did a shoot wearing nothing but a seven-foot boa constrictor.'

'Is that even legal?'

'I'm sure they had a permit for it.'

Mia laughed. 'No, I mean posing nude at sixteen.'

'I told them I was eighteen.' She sighed. 'Madness, isn't it? Thankfully I went on to bigger and better things from there.'

Mia put the camera to one side and hitched a piece of charcoal paper to her Bristol board. She sat down with the board across her lap and sharpened a pencil. 'Why did you stop?'

'I woke up one morning and decided I didn't want to spend the rest of my life being thin for a living.'

Mia smiled. 'Fair enough.'

'So I took off for a bit. Spain, then India. Just long enough to lose touch.'

'Not to get in touch?'

'No, lose touch. With everyone back home. I needed to slough it all off, all those people, all that money. All the fear. It was hard when I came back, starting again. But I had my family, and some old friends who didn't care if I put on five pounds or had a new wrinkle. And I had found my spirituality... Am I distracting you?'

'Hmm?'

Fillette smiled. 'Never mind.'

'Sorry, no, I am listening,' said Mia, catching up mentally. 'I don't mind at all. It helps, actually. It gives the work character. Your personality, I mean. Otherwise I might as well be painting a bowl of apples. So, you were saying, your spirituality?'

'Yeh. Travelling in India, experiencing a different mindset, it's helped me realise that beauty is not what's on the outside.'

How interesting it is that only beautiful people ever say that, thought Mia.

'I've learned to embrace aging. To honour it, you know?' said Fillette.

'Aging? What are you talking about? You're a spring chicken.'

'I'm a fossil by the standards of the business I was in before.'

'How old are you, if I may ask?'

'How old would you say?'

'Oh no, said Mia, shaking her head. 'I never answer that question. There be dragons.'

'I'm thirty-one.'

'No,' said Mia.

'Yes.'

'I would never have guessed it,' she said.

Fillette answered with a satisfied smile, and fondly Mia began cross-hatching the shadow side of her face, inscribing there in the eyelids and lips her small white lie.

She was reckless with the charcoal. Later she would be meticulous, but she liked this part best, plunging headfirst and unfettered into a new subject, drawing a line again and again until the paper was riddled with ditches, phantom limbs and abandoned thoughts trailing off the pose currently in play as if the potential energy of the figure had been made visible. She had not had a live model since Stellenbosch, and had not personally asked someone to pose for anything more ambitious than a pencil sketch since Cassie. She had been surprised when Fillette agreed, and even suggested herself that she come to Tooting, to save Mia having to trek to Westminster with all her paraphernalia.

It might have been nice over there, though, thought Mia, if only for the sake of having a decent piece of furniture for her nude to recline on, in a decent space, with tile or carpet underfoot instead of ear-wax coloured linoleum. But at least these were not difficult things for the imagination to improve upon. The real treasure was Fillette herself.

She had wanted for a long time to paint her employer. Probably, in fact, since first she had seen her wearing nothing but French knickers. Mia had been deeply impressed by this alone: the fact that the woman that she would soon be working for, if everything went well, wore lingerie to work.

Across a coffee table from each other at the Studio premises in Knightsbridge, each had regarded the other as a creature from a different world; each unknowably glamorous to the other. They began with smalltalk. Mia asked shy questions about posing for *Vogue*, Fillette had listened with grave deference as Mia answered questions about what Fillette had called "the situation in Africa."

But when it came to the massage experience Mia had accrued in Africa, Fillette was all business. If she was hired, she was told, she could expect to work on corporate contracts for a long while before Fillette would consider exposing her to any of her higher-end clients.

'We have high standards,' she said. 'But there's always room for new talent.' And, Fillette had said, she had a feeling about Mia.

Mia had been stunned by her own audacity when she offered to give Fillette a demonstration.

She had since learned the specificities of Fillette Maddox's version of the massage ritual, but she had been taught well and did not falter. Leave the room for the client to undress. Prompt conversation only once, in a way related to the massage, to begin with. Follow the client's cues to ascertain if further conversation is desired (Mia had guessed, correctly, that in London it would be desired less often than it was in South Africa). Ask twice if the client is comfortable and if there were any areas to be concentrated on. She asked for show, but she always knew. That was her talent.

The flesh beneath her hands, this flood of honey on the plinth, was unlike any she had ever touched for pure quality, and it was in that moment that Mia had become possessed of an urge to make an artwork of Fillette. Her original instinct had in fact been for a sculpture, but since then she had changed her mind. She had always been, at heart, a painter, and a naturalist, and a traditionalist. It was in this way that she would do justice to her subject.

She put the study on the easel and tore out another sheet of charcoal paper.

'Can I see that one?' said Fillette.

'No.'

'Oh, come on. Don't I have the right?'

'This is not a democracy,' said Mia. But she scooped the sketch up anyway and handed it to Fillette, who placed it against her bent knees and regarded it.

'Gosh,' she said. 'It's very different from a photograph, isn't it?'

Mia forgot to answer. Fillette's pose as she bent over the sketch had made a little light blink on in her head.

'I mean,' said Fillette, 'it's got more to it, even though it's less, you know, accurate. I wish I was creative like you.' She leaned forward a little and tilted the page, frowning. 'Why have you drawn a skull here inside my head?'

'Because there is one,' said Mia, rising. 'There's something I'd like to try. I'll be back in a moment.' She left the kitchen and trotted upstairs to Helena's room. It wasn't hard to locate what she was looking for: it was a doorstep of a book, jacketless, and red to boot. She could still remember the ripe, alien smell of the pages. It might have been the ink or the paper, but to Mia as a child it was the smell of the flora and fauna of Wonderland itself; the odour of snarks and sealing wax and the smoke rings blown by talking caterpillars.

She thumbed through the book. There was Tenniel's Alice with her tiny feet. *Smell me.* Mia lowered her head and inhaled deeply. It was faint – either the book or her nasal passages or both must have degenerated – but it was there. The smell of madness.

She descended to the kitchen again.

'Hold this for me instead, just like you were,' she said, taking the sketch back and handing Fillette the book.

'*Lewis Carroll: The Complete Works*,' read Fillette, glancing at the cover.

'I hope you like him,' said Mia. 'Because you're going to be stuck with him for a while.'

Mia had chosen the book purely for its appearance. It was the one of only two or three hardcover books in the house, and had recommended itself above the others because of the pleasingly battered quality of its claret-coloured exterior.

'I don't know,' said Fillette. 'I haven't read much of his work.'

'You've never read *Alice in Wonderland*?'

'I saw the movie,' Fillette opened the book to the title page. 'Kristoff de Villiers,' she said.

'What?'

'It's written inside the front cover. Kristoff de Villiers. Is that your father?'

'Yeh,' said Mia. 'It must be his book.' She had forgotten that part. How like Helena, she thought, to cart this cumbersome tome all the way to London with her; to love the story of the book itself, the object, as much as the stories it contained. 'Just open it somewhere in the middle and pretend to read,' she said.

Fillette nodded, and divided the thick book in two equal halves, one side of the cover resting on each of her thighs. Mia smiled. There. That would be it. She started humming as she commenced the second study. Twenty minutes later, she noticed Fillette turning a page with exaggerated stealth.

'You've started reading that?' said Mia.

Fillette smiled. 'I got bored reading the same page over and over,' she said. 'I didn't think you'd mind if I read on, as long as I didn't change the shape of the book much.'

'I don't mind. Which one are you reading?'

'*Through the Looking Glass*.'

'Oh yes. How are you finding it?'

'Strange,' said Fillette. 'Especially considering that I don't know what's going on. But you sort of get sucked in. I'll have to get a copy so I can read it from the beginning.'

When two hours had passed, Mia called an end to the sitting. She took a few more pictures, first using the Polaroid camera for the sake of recording the positions of light and shadow. Then, for the artistic shots, she switched to the old manual focus Leica that her mother had bequeathed to her when she was a thirteen.

'Where did you come across that relic?' said Fillette.

'My mother gave it to me. It's old, but it works.'

'Sentimental value?'

'That too. It almost killed me once.' Out before she had thought twice about it.

'Oh!'

'I'll tell you about it some other time.' She put down the camera. 'Okay. You're free.'

Fillette rose from the couch and stretched her naked form luxuriously.

'If you think this was bad, just wait till next time,' said Mia. 'I won't let you move an inch once I start painting.'

'I'll have to learn to sleep in that position,' said Fillette.

Once Fillette had left, Mia considered what had just passed. How had it been so easy to broach what she had taken, as an article of faith, to be a topic she was very sensitive about? Why did she feel she could tell Fillette about the camera, and Melanie about the balcony, when she had yet to tell her boyfriend so much as the name of Sam Loudon?

They were close, after all, if being 'close' meant that they had shared all the other ritualised secrets and intimacies you tell a lover to accelerate the bonding process. The story of Sam was certainly of that order. And yet.

She had told him, instead, about her parents' divorce, conscious as she was doing it that it was an act of substitution. A wound for a wound.

When Helena returned home about an hour later, she found Mia staring meditatively at the kitchen table, her pencil-wielding hand describing an endless circle on its surface.

'Don't draw on the furniture,' said Helena.

'Hm.'

Helena picked up a photo showing Fillette making a sultry moue over her bare shoulder. 'Who's the bombshell?' she asked.

'Fillette.'

'This is your boss?' said Helena. 'You are in the employ of Lauren Bacall?'

Mia snorted, tossing her pencil aside. 'She does have the bedroom eyes, doesn't she,' she said.

'I doubt those eyes would make it all the way to the bedroom.'

'I'm not using that one, anyway.' Mia rifled through the Polaroids in search of the shot she had chosen for the pencil study.

'Hang on a moment,' said Helena, stopping her hand. 'I'm sure I've seen her face somewhere before.'

'You might have,' said her sister. 'She was a model for a bit in the nineties. Quite a successful one.'

'Yes...' said Helena ruminatively. She took the part of the pile Mia had finished with and studied the photos. 'What's her full name?'

'Fillette Maddox.'

'I don't recognise it. But that doesn't mean anything. How fabulous to have her at your disposal. Did she commission you?'

'No such luck. I asked her to pose. But she said she might buy the painting when it's done.'

'Great. And if she doesn't, you can sell it to Hustler.'

'I believe a similar thought might have crossed her mind,' said Mia. 'She made me promise to give her all the photos and the negs when I'm finished. Just in case the tabloids get hold of them somehow. Here it is, look.' She handed Helena the photo that showed Fillette reclining in profile, the book resting against one raised knee.

'Oh, yes,' she said. 'I can see this is going to be nice.' She held up the photo next to the drawing. '*Si tu t'imagines, fillette fillette...*'

'What's that?' said Mia.

'Raymond Queneau...

*'Si tu crois petite  
si tu crois ah ah  
que ton teint rose  
ta taille de guêpe  
tes mignons biceps  
tes ongles d'émail  
ta cuisse de nymphe  
et ton pied léger  
si tu crois petite  
ca va ca va ca  
va durer toujours  
ce que tu te goudailleries  
fillette fillette  
ce que tu te goudailleries'*

'What does it all mean?' said Mia, delighted.

'It's sort of a French version of 'Gather ye Rosebuds While Ye May' or whatever it's called.'

'You must teach it to me.'

'I shall.'

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'That's how I got the job,' said Melanie. 'Or at least, the interview. I gave Fillette a reading.'

'Really?' said Mia. 'Here at the Studio?'

'Yeh.'

'I didn't know Fillette was into this sort of thing.'

'She's nuts for this sort of thing,' said Melanie. 'Why do you think she goes all gaga around Chantal?'

'I had wondered,' said Mia. She finished lining up the pieces of seaweed, inhaling wistfully. The small white room smelled like summer mornings on Koeëlbaai beach.

Melanie Du Fresne had not wanted to become a massage therapist. She had wanted to become a doctor. Unfortunately her older brother had also wanted to become a doctor, and it was he who was dispatched to Exeter with the bulk of his parents' savings behind him. He was their nest egg, and they could afford only one. So Melanie had said she would become a motor mechanic. Her father had said she would become a motor mechanic over his dead body, when she might yet land herself a wealthy husband on the strength of those impala calves and that unblemished nut-coloured skin, if she would only learn to be more demure and comport herself like a lady. 'So I told my father I'd become a beauty therapist,' said Melanie. 'And eventually I ended up doing this.'

Melanie had also told her father that her older brother would never make it beyond third year. Her father had told her she was not too old to get a hiding.

Melanie's older brother had dropped out of Exeter in third year.

Melanie's grandmother had said that Melanie had the Eye, and that she should learn to use it while she was still young and the dead were well-disposed towards her. Her father had said that over his dead body would he let his mother teach Melanie all that mumbo jumbo, that he had brought his family to England so that his children wouldn't grow up with their arses hanging out their trousers and their heads stuffed full of superstition, and Melanie's grandmother had said that she would see what she could do about teaching it to Melanie over his dead body.

'I hope she was joking,' said Mia.

Melanie smiled. 'You could never really tell with my gran. She didn't get round to teaching me much before she died herself though. Just the tarot. And some good hexes.'

Mia was almost sure Melanie was joking about the hexes. She laughed. 'So do you believe in it? The mumbo jumbo.'

Melanie took a seat on the plinth and began rolling up her trousers. 'I don't think the tarot can really predict the future,' she said. 'It can't tell you anything about yourself you don't know already, but it can show you things you would never find out otherwise. It's a way of taking what's on the inside and putting on the outside in a way that makes sense.'

'You don't think it's, you know, evil?' said Mia. She was trying to scoff at the idea herself as she said it.

'How can a load of cardboard and ink be evil?' said Melanie. 'If evil comes out of those cards, it's because you put it there, if you ask me,' Which, if you asked Melanie, was true about most things.

'Tell you what,' said Melanie. 'I'll bring you a book about it.'

'I would like that,' said Mia.

'Anyway. Don't worry about Jackie. She's just jealous because you're more popular than she is, I reckon.'

'Am I really?'

'Have a look at the appointment book next time you're in reception,' said Melanie.

In the new year, Fillette had started giving Mia shifts at the headquarters in Knightsbridge; a big jump up in the Studio hierarchy, and one which Mia hoped she could take as a sign that she might soon be offered a permanent position. There were other clues: Fillette had her not only massaging, but undergoing training in some of the other services the Studio offered under the tutelage of her colleague Melanie. Mia knew it was a point of honour for Fillette that the Studio dealt only in 'therapies', not beauty treatments – there were no manicures, pedicures, waxes, or facials – but she compromised in the grey area of 'rejuvenation treatments' – seaweed wraps, salt scrubs, and the like – and it was these arts that Mia was to master. Melanie had been appointed to teach her.

She had enjoyed her first few lessons, and would doubtless have continued enjoying them if it wasn't for the attitude of some of the other staffers; something of which she had become aware only recently, and completely by accident. While making up one of the rooms, she had overheard Chantal Flick, the resident Reiki Master, talking to another staffer, Jackie, in the room directly opposite.

'Ooh Jackie, just *quickly* train Mia to do myofascial, she'll pick it up in a few hours, you'll see.' It was Jackie herself, imitating Fillette at her most effluvial. 'As if it didn't take me bloody ages to get to this level,' she went on, 'and as if I didn't pay two thousand effing quid to get certified.'

'Fillette will pay you to do it,' she heard Chantal reply. 'She's been paying Melanie.'

'Well that's hardly the point, is it?' said Jackie. 'Why should Lady Muck waltz in here unqualified and expect Fillette to foot the bill for her training?'

'I'll have a word with Fillette about it,' Chantal had said.

At the time, Mia had not been aware of any plans on Fillette's behalf to enlist Jackie as her tutor. Part of her wished she had not overheard the conversation, but at least it explained why Jackie, who Mia had got along with well enough during corporate contracts, had been less than warm to her since she started working at headquarters. What perplexed Mia more was the idea that Chantal Flick should consider herself to be in a position to 'have a word' with Fillette any more than Jackie was. Chantal, an imposing Boudica Warrior Queen type, ran her reiki practice from the Studio premises, but was not in Fillette's employ.



She had noticed before that Fillette adopted a slightly different tone when she was talking to Chantal: if not quite deferential, then certainly respectful. She awaited the upshot uneasily, but never since had a word been said to her on the matter, leaving Mia doubly confused. It seemed that Fillette had indeed been swayed. There was nothing much she could do about it, but the matter had been weighing on her enough that she no longer looked forward to going to work in the mornings.

'I just wish Jackie wouldn't spread it around that I'm Fillette's lap-dog, or whatever,' said Mia. She smiled. 'Don't suppose you feel like putting a hex on her, do you?'

Melanie laughed. 'I don't mess with those things.'

'So you *do* believe in the mumbo jumbo.'

'I'll tell you what I believe. Whether they work or not, it's negative energy, the same as gossip. And trust me, it all comes back to you in the end. Times three.' She lay back on the plinth. 'Besides which, they're not worth the effort,' she said. 'They're just a bunch of prissy self-important idiots. Fillette most of all. Don't let them bother you.'

'I don't think Fillette is a prissy self-important idiot,' said Mia. She began to wrap the pieces of seaweed around Melanie's calf. 'Am I doing it right?'

'You're doing it fine.' Melanie was smiling at her knowingly.

'What?' said Mia.

'You think she's the tits, don't you.'

'Who? Fillette?'

'Well no offence, love, but it is sort of obvious that you've started dressing like her.'

There was no sense in denying this. More than once Mia had gone out shopping with the shameless intention of putting together a cheaper version of an outfit she had seen on Fillette.

'She's got good taste,' said Mia.

'Go on,' said Melanie. 'Admit it. You think the sun shines out of her bum.'

'She intrigues me,' said Mia. 'Artistically.'

'Oh, Lord help us,' said Melanie, rolling her eyes. 'Right, now I'll be the client.'

She began complaining loudly, in a Sloane falsetto, about a fictive boyfriend who had bought her a seven carat engagement ring instead of an eighteen carat one.

After Melanie's scathing assessment, Mia decided she wouldn't mention the fact that the reason she was brooding on the matter was because, that very evening, she would be spending time with not only Fillette, but Chantal, socially.

As far as Mia was aware, it was still a secret that she was painting Fillette. She was loathe to think what the other staffers might have to say about it if they knew. But after tonight, it would be common knowledge that their relationship was not merely professional. For at the end of their last sitting, Fillette had invited Mia to a meeting of her book club.

'You have a book club?' Mia had said. She had only just managed to stop herself from putting the emphasis on the 'you'.

'It's rather a special one this week,' said Fillette, 'because I have a guest speaker coming. Anne Ambleside, the author. She's just brought out *Beyond Beyond*.'

'I don't think I've heard of her,' said Mia.

'You might have heard of *The Mourning Star*,' said Fillette.

Mia shook her head. 'Is it a novel?'

'More a memoir,' said Fillette. 'You'll find her extremely interesting, I have no doubt.'

'I'm not sure I'll be able to read her book by Saturday.'

Fillette smiled. 'I don't think that will be a problem,' she said. 'It's just some friends. Chantal is one of the members.'

'Reiki Chantal?'

'Yes, Chantal Flick.'

Great, thought Mia.

'Where are you going?' said Helena at six that evening, passing by Mia's open door where she stood posing before the mirror in a black three-quarter length evening dress; the best she owned. 'Ascot?'

'I just wanted to see if it still fit me,' she responded.

It was close to the truth. She hadn't seriously considered wearing anything this formal, but it was reassuring to see herself looking her best, even if she knew that looking her best would not be helpful or even appropriate. She had been trying on outfit after outfit like a warrior selecting a sword. It was the only formula she knew of to make herself feel more prepared and in control of unknown territory; a very simple equation which she applied to everything from school projects to job interviews. When in doubt about content, don't stint on presentation.

It was not just Chantal, or the prospect of further gossip. As loathe as she was to admit it to herself, she was also intimidated by the idea of seeing Fillette in company. The time they spent together in Mia's kitchen belonged to a different universe, with different rules, and it seemed to her now as if the otherworldly flavour of those naked hours, which during the working week went as unacknowledged as an office affair, could only be an impediment to any other, more standard, sort of interaction.

The painting was all but done. Fillette had officially committed to buying it upon completion, and since doing so she had become touchingly involved in the creative process.

At their second sitting, she had surprised Mia by bringing along a bolt of lustrous purple fabric to drape over the hideous couch. 'I thought it might go with your colour scheme,' she had said. 'And the texture, the sheen, might contribute to the... what was the word you used? The *opulence* you're aiming for.'

'It's perfect,' Mia had said, enjoying Fillette's tacit assertion that her knowledge of fashion might qualify her to venture such a suggestion. 'But what a stroke of luck that you had it. What are you going to make with it?'

Fillette smiled. 'I'll find a use for it,' she said. Then she laughed. Mia looked quite stricken at the realisation that Fillette had acquired the fabric just for this painting. 'It's a good investment,' she soothed. 'I'm the one who has to stare at the painting for the rest of my life, and I would like this fabric in it.'

Mia's reflection rolled its eyes at her. She took off the dress, halved the amount of makeup she had on, and put on jeans and a gypsy top to bring herself back down to earth, fully aware that this would not be her final choice.

The moment Mia walked in that evening, she knew she had misjudged. She had settled, in the end, on a short qipao, red with a butterfly design in gold, which she had bought in China Town and never yet worn. It could be dressed up or down, and she had gone with something in between, adding high-heeled sandals and a knockoff Givenchy clutch bag, one of four Sonya had brought home from Singapore two Christmases ago.

Fillette opened the door in a wrap skirt and wool cardigan.

Behind her Mia could see a tableau of women in pashminas, billowy dresses, and palazzo pants lounging on and around Fillette's furniture. A few were sitting on the floor. She could hear someone telling a story in a low, intimate voice. As Fillette closed the front door behind them there was an outbreak of giggling, then the voice continued. An '*I know!*' reached her ears.

'Don't you look pretty,' said Fillette abstractedly as she led Mia towards the kitchen.

'I'm afraid I'm overdressed,' said Mia.

'As long as you're comfortable,' said Fillette. 'Our guest of honour hasn't arrived yet. What will you drink?'

'Whatever's open,' said Mia.

'White?'

'Fine.'

Fillette took a bottle from the fridge. 'Everyone, this is Mia,' she said, speaking into the living room through the kitchen hatch. Mia stepped in behind the hatch, feeling as if she were making a guest appearance on the Fillette Show. An assortment of bangles and bracelets were jangled at her in greeting.

Taking in the group at a glance, Mia's eyes immediately settled on a figure sitting cross-legged on a ladderback dining chair, dressed entirely in black. He drew her attention firstly because he was the only male in the room, and secondly because he had everyone else's. But he kept it for another reason altogether.

'You're not joining us for the book club?' said Mia.

For an answer, Sebastian gave a high Mozart giggle. 'Night June,' he said to the choppy-haired woman, solving one mystery. 'Goodnight all,' he said to the room at large. 'Happy haruspicing.' Fillette threw her brother a reproachful look, and declined to bid him goodnight. They rose simultaneously and disappeared in opposite directions: she to the front door, he presumably to a bedroom. They were almost exactly of a height, and walked at a similar pace, so that the effect was like watching someone walk away from a mirror.

A few minutes later Fillette returned, her face now positively aglow, with a middle-aged woman at her side.

'Everyone,' she said. 'May I present Mrs. Anne Ambleside.'

Mia's immediate impression was of staleness. Anne Ambleside was a plump woman, frizzy-haired, wearing extravagantly nondescript clothing made perhaps of crushed velvet, which plumb lined from bosom to hem. She also wore a watery, aimless smile; the kind of smile that looks like it has hung about for years and does not expect that it will be allowed to leave any time soon. She greeted them in a cracked voice that made Mia think of bone marrow. She was probably only in her fifties, but seemed to be aiming to come across as seventy.

As the formal discussion went under way, it seemed more and more that Mrs. Ambleside was not going to talk about her book at all. She was there, she explained, to teach them how to get in touch with their spirit guides. A twenty minute introduction was dedicated to explaining 'to those who don't already know' that spirit guides were supernatural beings assigned to each person to guide them through life's challenges.

'Sometimes they are deceased friends or relatives,' said Mrs. Ambleside. 'Sometimes they appear as animals, or angels. The important thing is to learn to trust their judgement, and *your own*. Because, although you don't remember it, in between your last life and this, you and your spirit guides *chose one another*.'

Mia put up her hand. 'Our last life and this?' she repeated.

'Yes.'

'So you believe in reincarnation?'

'Of course.'

'But,' said Mia. 'how can spirit guides be deceased friends and relatives if they've been reincarnated?'

'You are thinking in limited, Earthly terms of the concepts of time and space,' said Mrs. Ambleside brusquely.

'Oh,' said Mia.

'But that is another evening's worth of conversation, and tonight I'm here to talk about what you can do to release your own latent psychic potential.' There were disapproving glances towards Mia from some quarters. 'It's all explained in my book, dear,' said Mrs. Ambleside quickly to Mia. 'Now, shall we commence with a centring exercise?'

The lights were then turned down, and a cluster of candles lit in the centre of the room. 'If everyone would like to form a circle and join hands,' said Mrs. Ambleside.

Mia watched with polite confusion as the group did as they were bidden. Her gecko-fingers were furled in Fillette's marmoreal grip on the left and enveloped in the chubby hand of the woman called Grace on the right.

'Fillette,' Mia whispered.

For an answer, Fillette gave her hand a firmly friendly shut-up-darling sort of squeeze, and Mia decided she had no option but to play along.

Mrs. Ambleside instructed them to breathe deeply and imagine a nimbus of white light expanding from their stomach area into their chests, their throats, and finally extending up in a brilliant beam from the crown of their heads towards the ceiling. Mia conjured up the prescribed mental pictures dutifully, still wondering in the back of her mind when books were going to come into it. After about ten minutes of deep breathing, Mrs. Ambleside spoke again.

'Now you are feeling very calm,' she said. 'Imagine that the nimbus of white light inside you has surrounded you on all sides. You are lying in a mist of white light, but the mist is not cold or damp. Beneath you is some lovely grass.'

I don't think this lot is going to be needing any grass, thought Mia. She looked around her at the cloud of white mist which was not cold or damp.

'You are lying in a lovely grassy meadow surrounded by white mist,' said Mrs. Ambleside, 'and as you continue to breathe deeply in and out and in and out, the mist begins to clear a little with each breath you take.'

Mia switched to sukha pranayama breathing and tried to concentrate better on the lovely grass. The white mist was, as promised, growing less dense each time she exhaled. After ten breaths she found she was indeed feeling very calm. The grass really was rather lovely, it was soft and springy and it did not make her itch, but supported her whole body so gently that it was easy to forget she had a body, and oh, what was this? The mist had all cleared away, and she saw that the green meadow ran up to meet a blue, blue sky.

You can sit up, very relaxed, and get to your feet, and begin walking through the meadow, said a soothing voice somewhere nearby, and although Mia could not quite remember who it belonged to, she knew that it meant her no ill and that she could do its bidding without fear.

As you walk, said the voice, you will notice that the meadow slopes ever so gently upwards, but the rise is not so steep as to be taxing. In fact it is very refreshing to climb up towards the sunnier parts of the meadow. And as you climb you will notice that you feel lighter and more peaceful the higher you get.

Mia walked. Her feet were bare on the lovely springy grass and the sunlight was glorious on her skin.

The slope is beginning to level out now, said the voice, and if you turn and look behind you, you will see that you have climbed an immensely high mountain, and that the place at which you started is very, very far below you, but there is nothing to fear, for if you turn around again you will see that you are now in a second meadow, and the grass here is even greener and the sky even bluer. There is also a path, beginning at your feet where you are standing, and stretching away in a straight line across the grass. Still very relaxed and calm, you may now begin strolling along this path.

Mia could see the path, but was forced to disagree with the voice about the slope levelling out. It was still climbing, and there were rough steps cut into it. As she mounted them, Mia gradually became aware of the fact that she could no longer feel the sun on her skin. She looked up, and faltered in her pace, suddenly unsure. For instead of greener grass and bluer skies, she saw that she was in the midst of a thick and tangled forest. The trunks of the trees that grew next to the path stretched up so high that she could not see their tops, and there were huge fungus-like growths on their roots. The voice had not said anything about trees.

Peering down the length of the shadowy path, Mia saw a very large, black door, standing free in its centre. She walked closer. She thought it rather strange, but in a very calming and relaxing way, that there appeared to be some liquid substance seeping out from underneath the door, staining the path a dark colour. As she regarded it, a tinnitus-like buzz began sounding from the forest around her. It came from all sides, and grew louder the closer she got to the door. At the same time, the voice faded, or was drowned out, or both, until she could no longer hear it.

The door looked very strong and very closed. Gingerly she approached, trying not to step in the dark substance that was pooling around the bottom of the door. All the same she could feel a wetness clinging to the soles of her bare feet. She reached out as far as she could, leaning out over the growing puddle to reach the door-handle. She pushed down, and found that the handle was quite stubborn. With no other option open to her, she stepped closer still, allowing both feet to sink into the deathly cold liquid, so that she could try the handle again with both hands. Still it wouldn't budge, and at last she was obliged to put her full weight on it. She shoved as hard as she could. The mechanism gave, and the door swung inwards.

She tried to run, but found she had nothing to run on. The path, the forest, the door, it had all disappeared. And then – it happened very suddenly, with a roller-coaster sensation of leaving her stomach behind, except that it was not just her stomach, but everything else as well – she fell.

Mia sat bolt upright, her eyes wide. Beside her, Fillette's eyes opened, but there was no recognition in them, and they closed again a moment later. Around Mia seven supine figures lay corpselike with their hands at their sides, and before her one old woman sat in a chair, lit from beneath by the cluster of candles in the centre of the room.

Mrs. Ambleside, thought Mia. Their eyes met. The old woman – she looked very old, now, in this light – pressed a finger to her lips and nodded towards the kitchen.

When Mia had remembered about legs and arms and what one did with them, she stood up, noticing as she did so that someone had placed a blanket over her. She kicked it off and followed Mrs. Ambleside from the room. They entered Fillette's kitchen.

'Are you quite all right?' said Mrs. Ambleside. Mia could see face-powder caked in the creases of her cheeks and forehead beneath the white light. 'You were very far away from us.'

'I'm fine,' said Mia.

'You cried out.'

'I thought I might have. I'm sorry.'

'What happened?'

'I'm not sure. I saw something strange during the visualisation.'

'It was in the second meadow?'

'I never got to the second meadow. There was a door in the way.'

'A door,' said Mrs. Ambleside.

'A black door.'

'I see. Did you open it?'

'Yes.'

'And what did you see?'

'I don't know. I woke up.'

'I see,' said Mrs. Ambleside again.

'What does that mean?' said Mia.

Mrs. Ambleside smiled again. 'It means you are on the threshold of attaining higher consciousness.'

Fillette's brother entered the kitchen bearing an empty cereal bowl. Along with his black clothing he now had on a pair of furry green slippers with puffy silver claws at their ends. His eyes flicked between the two women.

'I should go back now,' said Mrs. Ambleside. 'Why don't you come and sit beside me, and we can speak when the others finish.'

'I think I'll stay out here for a while,' said Mia. 'I need some fresh air.' She did not want to go back to that room with its candlelight and its abandoned bodies.

Mrs. Ambleside nodded and amblesided out of the kitchen towards the living-room.

Sebastian threw Mia a well-here-we-are-then look. 'Fag?' he said.

'Yes, please.'

He grinned. 'So you and I have similar tastes in fresh air,' he said. 'Come on, this way.'

He led her through the darkened dining room and out onto a balcony which spanned its length. The air was keen, and Mia inhaled grateful draughts of it. To their left, reflected light off the Thames made watery lens-flares in her peripheral vision. Sebastian lit two cigarettes together in his mouth and passed one to Mia. She took it from him and jerked a little at the first inhalation.

'Stronger than you like?' said Sebastian.

'A bit.' She looked at the label. It was a Camel Filter. 'These don't taste anything like the Camels at home,' she said.

'I wouldn't have guessed you for a Camel girl,' said Sebastian.

'I'm not, in general.'

He hooded his eyes and studied her for a few moments. 'Hmm,' he said ruminatively. 'Gauloises...' - he smiled, seeing by her face that he was right so far - '...blue.'

Mia laughed. 'Close. Very good. Gauloises red.' He tilted his eyes and clicked his tongue, as if to say, of course.

'How did you know?'

'It's a talent I have.'

'That's a pretty good party trick. Does clairvoyance run in the family, then?'

'Fillette would like to think so. That's why you're here, isn't it?'

'Me?'

'All of you.'

'I have no idea why I'm here. I've been feeling lost ever since I arrived. This is the strangest book club I've ever heard of.'

Sebastian laughed a little. 'Did you see many books around?'

'Not many, no.'

'My sister is not what one would call literarily inclined,' said Sebastian. 'The book club is just a front.'

'For what, though?' said Mia.

'Oh... dabbling. They like to make an evening of it. *Blanc de blanc*, *Eye de newt* and *toe de frog*.'

'As in, witchcraft?'

'You shouldn't take me too seriously,' said Sebastian. 'But some of the members would probably be proud to call it that. Mostly they just talk. This was Fillette's first 'serious' meeting.'

'Because of Mrs. Ambleside?'

'Do you know who she is?'

'I was led to understand that she's a writer.'

'Anne Ambleside is a Wiccan high priestess,' said Sebastian. 'Although you won't see that on the cover of her book.'

'A *what*?'

'No, a witch. Your colleague in there belongs to the same coven, as I understand it.'

'Chantal?' said Mia, feeling more lost in the light of this news than she had when she knew nothing.

'That's the one. The rest of them are just garden variety flakes.'

'And Fillette? Is she Wiccan too?' said Mia, attempting to sound unruffled. In her head, she was scrambling around like a hostess laying extra places at the table as she tried to accommodate this information.



Sebastian snorted. 'Fillette is... Fillette is open to all comers. She's a spiritual dumping zone. If you told her you were an Archmage of the Divine Order of The Great Spaghetti Monster she'd hang on your every word. But yes, I suppose you could say she wants to be Wiccan. Tonight's little Tupperware party is part of her strategy to get into the good graces of the big players.'

They were not so similar after all, Sebastian and his sister. As she listened to him speak, even his physical features seemed to Mia to resemble Fillette's less and less by virtue of the way he used them. They might have the same supple lips, but Fillette's were never curled around such mordant words. 'Surprised?' he said.

'A little. I didn't know,' said Mia. 'It explains some things.' Specifically, she was thinking, it had at last given her an inkling of why Fillette treated Chantal with kid gloves.

Sebastian shrugged. 'She's not outspoken about it. She must like you a lot if she invited you.'

Mia thought he was outspoken enough about it for the both of them.

'So... what did they do to you in there? Why were you so upset?' said Sebastian.

Mia shook her head, looking over the balcony towards the river. She had never liked it, The Thames. There was something grudging, slovenly, wilfully lugubrious, about that dark water. But the same had been said of many a free thing cast into bondage. 'They didn't do anything,' she said. 'It was just strange.' His take on the proceedings inside had already made the entire affair seem a little silly even to her. But even as she said it, Mia knew that what bothered her about the unwilling vision was not that it was strange, but that it had seemed so very familiar.

'Higher consciousness isn't for everyone,' said Sebastian.

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'Higher consciousness, eh?' said Melanie, smiling.  
'You don't believe in higher consciousness?' said Mia.  
'I just can't believe Fillette is hanging out with Anne Ambleside.'  
'Do you know her?' said Mia.  
'Not personally. But I've heard her on the radio. She's a complete nutter.'  
Mia laughed, glad to have her own assessment confirmed.

One by one, Melanie turned over the five cards that Mia had chosen. She laid them in a cross pattern, backs facing up. The two of wands, Mia read. The Sun. The World.  
'So you don't believe in spirit guides either?' said Mia. The three of discs. Change.  
'I don't know about spirit guides,' said Melanie. 'My brother's friend Michael started talking to dead people around the time he turned eighteen. Then he was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia.'  
Mia was not sure whether to laugh or not. She waited until Melanie looked up at her and smirked. She smirked back. 'Surely you of all people believe that the dead can communicate with us?' she said.  
'Me of all people?' said Melanie.  
'Well,' said Mia. 'What with your grandmother knocking things over in your house and all.' This was something Melanie had told her quite matter-of-factly the week before.  
'I don't think we sense spirits because they're there,' Melanie said. 'I think they're there because we sense them.'

Mia had had only morning appointments that day, but instead of going straight home when they were finished, she had ended up spending three hours with Melanie in the Studio stockroom, talking.

Now sitting on the tube on her way home to Tooting, Mia paged through the tarot book Melanie had brought for her to borrow. *The Emperor*. *The Hierophant*. She paused at a Rococo version of the Lovers card; the intertwined pair, the locked eyes.

He never gazed at her in this way, Matt. He never even looked at her, and yet his eyes were on her always. What Matt did was watch her. He watched her right in the eye. Even in bed, especially in bed, until she could no longer bear it and had to close her own in order to forget herself.

She thought again of Melanie's assessment of the vision she had seen, or been shown, at Fillette's house.

'Well, it's lower consciousness, not higher consciousness,' she had said. 'That stuff came from your subconscious, it's no more mysterious than that. I mean, hello. A door that's hard to open. Slimy liquid.'

'What of it?'

Melanie shrugged, smiling. 'Clearly you have sexual issues.'

'I do not.'

'Tell us, Miss de Villiers.' She put on what she assumed to be a German accent. 'How iz Herr Fletcher in ze sack, eh?'

She had ducked behind her hands to deflect the pen thrown at her in response.

A lot of Melanie's ideas were confusing to Mia. She didn't seem to make much distinction between the realness of things inside one's head and the realness of things in the world. 'I'm not quite getting you,' she had said. '"They're there because we sense them"? Is it real, or is it projected? It can't be both.'

'Why not?'

'Because either it's all in your head, or it's out there in the world.'

'You're a painter, right,' said Melanie. 'When you make a painting, it starts out as a picture in your head, right? Then you paint it, and even if you were to die, the picture stays in the world, and other people can see the picture that was in your head too, because you've made a copy of it. Right?'

'Right.'

'So why can't it be the same with memories?'

Mia imagined it: a world teeming with replicas of the departed, not just one ghost for every person that had died, but one for every person who remembered him. 'Because then they would be everywhere,' she said.

'Not everyone knows how to paint,' said Melanie, smiling.

'Are you saying you think I have the Eye?' said Mia.

'I'm saying I think you should learn the tarot.'

Mia lifted one piece of her stone-age earmuff style headphones briefly to hear what station they had reached. They were the same headphones she had used on the plane over here... what was it? Eleven months ago, now? The same mix tapes for that matter, and no wonder in that case that Thom Yorke was changing keys even more liberally than was his custom; the tape was stretched all to hell.

Davy had advised her to get herself an i-Pod, but she liked her old walkman with the band-aid holding the batteries in; it didn't matter if she dropped it or lost it, and it was certainly no prize for muggers. Anyway, she had a hunch Matt was going to buy her an i-Pod for her birthday.

She watched the oblong microcosm of the tube car to her own soundtrack, turning up the volume to drown out the caterwauling hen party that had entered the car at the last stop in fairy wings and halos. Everyone else was silent, solipsistic, with Dan Browns or newspapers spatchcocked on one hand in front of their eyes.

Mia had the tarot book, but she also had a newly purchased sketchpad, and this she now pulled from her shopping bag.

It had never quite lost its thrill for her, the promise of a virgin A4 sketchpad, and even better when she had virgin materials to draw with. A blank canvas held its proverbial metaphoric weight, and a lump of clay too, to a certain extent, but sketchpads were special.

On her seventh birthday she had received a sketchpad just like this, along with a box of water pastels that looked good enough to eat.

'Mia won't share,' Katrina had complained to their mother. It usually worked a treat, the old share and share alike routine, and Mia's heart sank as she pictured the immanent fate of her gifts: Katrina's inept fists mashing those jewel-like cylinders of colour onto her pristine white sketch-paper. But this time, to Mia's delighted surprise, her mother shook her head. '*Dis nie speelgoed nie*,' she had told Katrina. 'The pastels are just for Mia, Katjie. She needs them to practice because she wants to become a real artist.'

Mia had declared this intention only a week or two earlier, and at the time she was sure she meant it. But then she had also been sure she meant it when she had said she wanted to become a dolphin trainer a year earlier, and Inneke had certainly not had the same reaction then; nor a year before that, when Mia had wanted to become an actual dolphin.

The fact that her mother believed she could, *would*, become an artist, and had paid Money to get her these things towards that very end, caused Mia's vision of her future to leap from the realm of the merely desirable into the realm of the attainable. Mia, having only recently become habituated to differentiating between the two, was awed. At that moment the pastels and the blank sketchbook took on an overwhelming significance. They were the sword in the stone, and for an entire day she was too scared to touch them, lest she prove that she was not, after all, the boy who would be king.

'*Is jy nie lus en teken nie, Akkedissie?*' her mother asked when the cake was gone and the balloons had burst, Katrina pacified with kokis, scrap paper and Nesquik, and Mia was at the kitchen table, staring at her gift as if it were homework or a plate of broccoli or a spoon she was trying to bend with her mind, her icing-smeared lips stiffened into the morose stoicism of one facing an insurmountable yet unavoidable obstacle.

'I don't know what to draw,' said Mia, unable to express the daunting new weight of the future she had somehow conjured into almost-being, and her reluctance to jeopardise her mother's matter-of-fact faith in her ability to realise it.

'Why don't you start with a pencil,' said Inneke. 'Then, if you change your mind about something, you can rub out and start again before you use the pastels.'

Besides the sketchpad, Mia had also acquired some lead pencils, a new sharpener and a watercolour set. She had never liked using watercolours much, finding them insipid and finicky, but she knew they would be best suited to the task she had set for herself.

Mia took out a hard pencil from the bag and began a rough sketch (one can make no other kind on a moving train) of a figure with a bag on his back.

'You need to find a deck that speaks to you,' Melanie had said, as Mia thumbed through her own deck. 'This is the Thoth deck, but there are lots of others. Hundreds.'

Mia lingered over the twenty-two 'trump' cards of the Major Arcana - the Greater Secrets. She was deeply engaged by these worlds in miniature, steeped in symbolism that had been part of human consciousness for centuries, even millennia, and the way that each deck depicted that world so differently.

'Mel,' she had said. 'If the point is to find a deck that has personal significance, is there any reason why I shouldn't make my own one?'

'You could,' said Melanie. 'Would you get it printed professionally and everything?'

'I don't know, I'll see. I've only just thought of it. I could just do a DIY job. Scan them, reduce them and get them printed and laminated at a copy shop.'

'It might be a bigger project than you think,' said Melanie. 'The Thoth deck took five years to make.'

Mia laughed at the thought of five years. 'I'll give it a try,' she said.

She was enthused enough by the idea to make a pit stop at an art shop in Knightsbridge before embarking for home.

Mia was starting with the trumps purely because the cards were more interesting and diverse. But as she believed in tradition, and because she liked the fact that the Major Arcana told a kind of story, she had decided at least to draw those in order. So she started with the zero card; The Fool.

She would have to refresh her memory on all the attendant symbols, but she decided not to peruse the tarot book again to this end; not just yet. It would be difficult not to be influenced by the style of the Rider-Waite deck or any of the other illustrations, and she wanted to find a direction first. He had a bag on a stick, she knew that much. And a dog. And a rose.

She began filling out the background, labouring to keep the line clean, the perspective at least a little flat, the figures stylised.

It was not something that came easily to her. She had struggled back in university to cut the apron strings of naturalism and develop a style; to have the guts to put her own stamp on her subjects. *Your work exhibits versatility, application, and ability, but as yet, no originality*, wrote her least favourite lecturer, Mnr. Minnaar, at the end of her first term. *Dig, Mia!* Wrote Mej. Serefini, her favourite.

Mia soul-searched. She experimented, in her own time, with pencil, ink, chalk, charcoal, gouache, and tempera. She dabbled in impressionism, expressionism, pointillism, analytical cubism, synthetic cubism, surrealism, and (on a single sarcastic afternoon), dada, but she succeeded only in imitating each style to a nicety. *Your technical prowess continues to impress, but not to inspire*, wrote Mnr. Minnaar at the end of the second term. *Also, your style has become worryingly inconsistent. And, Dig deeper, Mia!* Wrote Mej. Serefini.

Mia was crushed; she began to suspect she was lacking not just in imagination, but in character, personality, depth. 'In other courses, doing badly just makes you feel stupid,' she said to Sam Loudon. 'In fine art practical, it makes you feel *shallow* as well.'

'You have to climb the ladder before you can knock it down,' said Sam.

Someone was watching her. It was as invasive as being tapped on the shoulder. Mia looked up from her work, and sure enough, the man sitting across from her had given up on his Dan Brown in favour of staring at her. He was not ogling, in the timeless tradition of lone men on public transport, but rather morbidly transfixed, as if she were a rare species of stag beetle. Mia blushed, guessing why. In an unconscious effort to coax her pencil into capturing her mental picture more exactly, she had been twisting her features into an exaggerated version of the facial expression she was trying to bestow on her drawing. This realisation led to another, and, focusing on her sketch again, she clucked her tongue.

Her Fool was already far too detailed, too human. Maybe she would take a glance at the Rider-Waite illustrations after all.

But, studying the little figure she had drawn, she found she could not abandon him so heartlessly. She liked him. There was something engaging about the quixotic ingenuousness hinted at in the few strokes that composed his face; that look she had been trying out on her own face only a moment ago. He had the endearing gee-whiz demeanour of the country rat. That bag might as easily contain his laundry as the tools of the four suits. That rose might be for his *matriekafskeid* partner. Her lips curved into an upside-down smile at her own mawkishness. Kiss me, you Fool.

In Mia's case it was the knocking down part, not the climbing part, with which she battled. Reproducing reality was almost effortless; she had it down to, well, an art, by the time she left high school. But while painstaking mimesis had been enough to get her into fine arts at Stellenbosch, she soon learned that it would not be enough to see her out again.

Release came during the course of three days' break from university, at a time when she was too heartsore to show her face in class. At home, in pyjamas, she painted her first and only abstract piece, discovering in that nameless state a brief succour in the idea of meaning without reference. She destroyed the torrid grey-green canvas when it was finished. But the breakthrough had been made; the experiment in catharsis had freed up her elbow for good. Her teachers were baffled at the charismatic style that seemed to spring full-fledged from her brush upon her return. Mia was there inside her work at last.

And so, for better or worse, was Sam Loudon.

Mia looked at the tarot book's Fool, turned a couple of pages. *Death*, she read. *The Moon*. *The Devil*. *They're there because we sense them*, she thought. Melanie had said it gently.

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Fillette, like most people, disliked her feet. Mia loved Fillette's feet, as she loved most people's. Feet were the working class of the body, straightforward and uncivilised and not versed in deception. When exposed, they could tell you more about what was going on in someone's head than any other part of them. Fillette's happened to be elegant, narrow, and – perhaps to make up for the perennial equanimity of her face – unusually expressive. Today more so than usual. Mia was watching them closely, at first with amusement, then irritation, as she was also trying to paint them.

'Sit still,' she said.

'I am sitting still,' said Fillette.

'Sit stiller,' said Mia. It wasn't just the feet, her whole body was being difficult. It wasn't just the fidgetiness that was the problem. Although she sat as always in the same position, the force of her form on the couch was different. At first Mia thought it was the blanket: she had allowed Fillette to cover herself with, as it was so cold in the kitchen. But that wasn't it. The sum of parts was adding up to a different whole, her demeanour shifting from languid to expansive to coquettish as she allowed her mood to wag the dog. And she giggled. Although she could be frivolous, Mia had never known Fillette to be a giggler before. Mia began to form a suspicion.

A half-hour into the sitting, she threw her brush into the turpentine and leaned back in her chair. It wasn't working. The quality she was after, that delicate urbanity that made Fillette so captivating, was gone.

'What's wrong, darling?' said Fillette.

'I don't know,' said Mia. You're behaving like a precocious child. 'I think I'm getting a headache.'

'Oh, let me help,' said Fillette, launching herself off the couch as if it was a trampoline and padding round behind the easel. Mia checked the instinct to cover her work. With a few exceptions, she had never been comfortable with people looking at a piece before it was finished. It felt to her like being walked in on in the shower. But if anyone had a right to feel naked, it was Fillette, and if she was interested in the progress Mia had made since last she had been allowed a glimpse, she didn't show it. 'Just relax,' she said, placing her hands on Mia's head.

Mia was curious. She had never had a massage from the boss before. She closed her eyes, awaiting pressure, but none was forthcoming.

'What are you doing?' she asked politely.

'Reiki. Chantal's been teaching me the attunement.'

'Hm.'

'Tell me if you feel anything,' said Fillette.

'Ah, I feel a sort of warmth over my forehead,' Mia answered, quite honestly, as Fillette's hands were placed on either side of it.

'I think I can feel the blockage here,' said Fillette. 'Is the pain behind your eyes?'

'More in the back, near my neck, actually.'

'Oh, yes,' said Fillette, adjusting the position of her hands. 'Unfortunately I don't have my symbols with me.'

'Your cymbals?'

'There's a set of symbols charged with reiki power. You concentrate on them.'

'Right.' From beneath Fillette's breasts Mia felt a familiar visual prodding, and, turning her head, she caught the flutter of a curtain in the neighbour's window across the lawn, and a brief impression of three-quarters of the face of Mrs. Beel, the original owner of Scarlett the cat.

'What are you feeling now?' said Fillette, noting the change in her posture.

'I'm feeling a sort of deep-seated embarrassment,' said Mia, nodding her head towards the facing window.

'Oh!' exclaimed Fillette, jumping out Mrs. Beel's line of sight. Mia laughed.

'How about some tea,' she said. She rose to fill the kettle.

'What are these amazing drawings?' said Fillette. Mia turned to see Fillette thumbing through her sketch pad. 'They look like very big tarot cards.'

Once again Mia experienced and checked the desire to prevent Fillette from looking.

'They are tarot cards,' she said. 'I'm making a deck.'

'Making one!' said Fillette. 'Why?'

'Why not?'

Fillette paused, turning a few more pages. 'It's just... Anne seems to take a rather dim view of Tarot.'

'Anne?'

'Ambleside.'

'You're still in touch with Anne Ambleside?' said Mia, wondering if Fillette had come any closer in her aspirations to be included in her inner circle.

'On and off,' said Fillette. She trailed her fingers over the lettering of Mia's sketch for the *Empress* card. 'This looks a little like your mother,' she said. 'Is that on purpose?'

'I hadn't thought about it,' said Mia. 'How do you know what my mother looks like?'

Fillette pointed towards the black and white photos on the kitchen wall. One of them did indeed show Mia's mother with her three other daughters, their faces at various angles, and only Inneke looking directly at the camera. There was another with Inneke alone, sitting in a rocking chair, marking exam papers. 'I assumed it was your mother,' said Fillette. 'See, in this drawing she's sitting just as she is in that rocking chair.'

Mia had to agree that there were compositional similarities. 'I suppose it might have been subliminal,' she said.

'What a terrific expression she's got,' said Fillette. 'How did you learn to make your drawings look so real?'



It was the kind of question that usually made her wince, but as it happened, Mia had an answer for this particular one. 'The trick,' she said, 'is to imagine that your drawing is going to have to use what you give it.'

Something taught to her not by any of her schoolteachers or university lecturers, or any artist whose work she had studied, nor by any textbook on draughtsmanship.

Fillette giggled again. 'What do you mean?'

'I mean you should never forget the function played by every part of the thing you are drawing. And the things you're leaving out.'

It was taught to her, in fact, by a law professor.

*Kyk, Pappa.* A drawing of a winged leopard. Like any kid would, she had drawn it side on, and like most kids do, she had left out the two legs that were furthest from the viewer.

*'Allemagtig, en wat is die gedierte?'*

*'Dis 'n engeluiperd.'*

*'Maar hoe gaan hierdie arme engeluiperd die engelbokkies vang as hy net twee bene het? Hy sal omval, woeps!'* He tilted the page to demonstrate.

*'Dis agter die ander, Pappa.'* But even as she said it she realised how flat her poor winged leopard was, how useless his two visible paws for the purpose of pouncing on his Crayola prey. No matter that his spots were not mere flecks of black, but genuine leopard rosettes that continued up faithfully into the pinfeathers of his wings. No matter that there was a hunter's gleam to his single vivid eye. He was an empty threat, her flying leopard. He would collapse before he'd taken a single prowling step.

Once she began to think about it, she found there was no end. A living creature needed not just the correct quotient of limbs, but tendons and joints and muscles and bones in all the right places in order for those limbs to work. A *krokofant*'s teeth and tusks had to fit together when he snapped those fearsome jaws shut. If she did a poor job with a *kameel/koei*'s hind legs because they were hard to draw, the beast would be limping grotesquely from hillock to field in the green grazing she had provided for it. Mia cared for her flock of mutants like a veterinarian. Concerns like the biochemistry of a mermaid began to trouble her. The skeletal structure of an gryphon. The digestive system of a centaur.

Mia began resuscitating the colours she had abandoned on the palette. 'Did you know that if Barbie were real,' she said, 'she would have to walk on all fours to get around?'

Fillette laughed. 'Actually I did. My brother used to cite that fact whenever I was on a diet. It was part of the speech he would make to convince me that I was setting a bad example for teenage girls by appearing starved in magazines.'

For Pegasus to get airborne, he would need a wingspan of 150 feet, and hollow bones. The size of a fairy's braincase would allow for an intelligence no greater than that of a sparrow. For Brakenjan to speak, like he did in her father's stories, he would need a shorter muzzle, more substantial lips, and a muscular, mobile, human tongue.

'Why, Mia!' said Fillette. 'This is Sebastian!' She had the sketchbook open now to the *Magician* card.

'No, it's not,' said Mia.

'Mia, it is. I don't know how you manage to get such a good likeness from memory, but it's the spitting image.'

'How do you know it's not you?' Mia countered.

'We don't look as similar as you think. This is definitely him.'

'All right, madam,' said Mia, handing Fillette a cup of tea. 'Back to your cell.'

Fillette returned obediently to her place on the purple-draped couch. Mia closed the sketchpad, taking a further frowning glance at the *Magician* drawing before she did so. It did look a little like Sebastian. That is to say, it had high cheekbones, and arched brows, and a cryptic quality – but then the *Magician* was *supposed* to have a cryptic quality.

'Fuck.'

Fillette had spilled tea in her lap. Mia had never heard her curse before, and the effect was remarkable; the full carnal glory of the tired old word restored as it exploded from her naked lips. She pivoted her pelvis to send the liquid away from the purple fabric and towards the centre of her body. Drops of Earl Grey in her navel and in the neat topiary below it. Fillette Maddox, sometime cover girl of *Harper's Bazaar*, had tea in her crotch on Mia's couch in Tooting. Luckily she took milk.

Mia soaked and squeezed a dishcloth and sent it arcing towards Fillette's midriff.

'Okay,' she said. 'Enough. Who is he?'

She had expected a show of innocence, but Fillette enveloped herself around the subject the moment it was offered. Yes, she said, there was someone new in her life, and he was fabulous, and she was ecstatic, and she was sorry if she had been a bad nude, but wasn't Mia thrilled for her?

'I somehow – you'll think me pathetic – but I somehow thought it was all over for me and love after Quintin,' she said. Quintin Hays, designer to the stars, had been Fillette's significant other for six years. Their break-up, as Mia understood it, had coincided with Fillette's departure from the fashion industry. He was like the hook on which Fillette had hung her former life, and every time Fillette had mentioned his name in the past, it had seemed to Mia as if she were taking down these glad-rags and parading around in them, just to make sure she could still get away with it.

Mia had a similar impression the first time Fillette spoke the name of Rudolph Victor Adamus. The emperor's new clothes, she thought, and listened obligingly as Fillette relieved herself of the burden of her infatuation.'

'I just put it out there in the universe that I was ready to find my soul-partner,' said Fillette. 'And the universe showed me that I had found him already. Incredible, isn't it?' said Fillette. 'The answer was right there all along, just waiting for me to be ready to see it.'

'All along?' said Mia.

'I've known him forever. Since I was a little girl. His father was a good friend of my father's.'

'That's sweet,' said Mia.

About a month ago, he had been given a massage voucher as a gift from his girlfriend, and seeing the name in the appointment book, Fillette had granted him the rare honour of personally administering its redemption. An unnecessary thank you phone-call had turned into thirty phone-calls, and at last – only yesterday – the situation had come to fruition, and the unfortunate girlfriend given her walking papers. Mia was taken aback when she heard the name of the jilted lover. She was a fairly well-known actress. I think rather Fillette's father should have asked him casually for business advice on Fillette's behalf – she was thinking of opening a second branch within the next two years – and he had got in touch with her.

'It was frightful for her, poor girl,' said Fillette. 'But what can one do? *Ce'st la vie.*'

“Rudolph,” said Mia. What a name. 'Does he go by it?' she asked, trying to be diplomatic.

'Mia, darling,' said Fillette. 'Haven't you *heard* of him?'

He was the second of that name, Mia learned, and like his late father, he was a property developer. A celebrity in his own way, amongst his own sort, if one read the right newspapers, Rudolph Victor II was known to have exponentially increased the holdings of Rudolph Victor I's investment firm in the seven years since his ascension to the throne. His personal fortune had not been publicly quantified, but he was, conservatively speaking, a multi-millionaire.

'A multi-millionaire?' said Mia. The word itself seemed fabulous, almost childishly so, like the word "super-hero" or the word "extra-terrestrial." And those were *Pounds*, not Rands, thought Mia. 'I haven't heard of him, no,' she said.

Fillette offered Mia the name of his investment consortium, but that didn't ring a bell either. She named and described a couple of the properties the company owned in the City. Mia thought she might have seen them. Then Fillette named another one in Canary Wharf which Mia had not only heard of, but been inside several times.

'That's Matt's building,' she said.

'Your Matt?'

'Yes, my Matt. I met him there.'

'I thought you met him at a food market.'

'No, you're remembering the story wrong. His company was one of our corporate clients, remember?'

'Yes, yes, of course I know *that*,' said Fillette dismissively, in a hurry to get back to her own boyfriend. As she enthused Mia noticed that she kept shifting the position of her lower body on the couch, betraying an increased energy flow in her hips and sacrum; the Swadhisthana chakra. For the rest of the hour she was quite beyond hope, and eventually Mia gave up on the sitting altogether. It was academic at this stage anyway; she had what she needed from Fillette. A good thing too, as it appeared that what she needed from Fillette was gone.

'I want to get you two together sometime soon, Mia,' Fillette said, putting on her underwear. 'He's very interested in art. He could introduce you to all the right people.'

'Oh?' said Mia. She thought she could take this to mean that Rudolph Victor Adamus liked to spend his spare change on highbrow long-term investments to show his friends.

'He owns a Rothko.'

'Does he, now,' said Mia. 'I doubt he'd be interested in a little fungal microbe like me.'

Fillette giggled rapturously. 'But *Mia*. Of course he will be. The moment he lays eyes on *that*.' She widened her eyes towards the back of Mia's canvas.

'This?' said Mia. 'You're going to show this to... people?'

'I most certainly am. Not just anyone of course. But you don't expect me to keep it entirely to myself, do you?'

'I suppose not,' said Mia. She hadn't imagined it being on display, somehow.

'When do you think it will be finished?' asked Fillette, zipping her boots up. Today she had worn the knee-length brown leather Jimmy Choos which Mia had coveted from the moment she first laid eyes on them.

'Perhaps next week,' she said.

'Lovely!' said Fillette. 'I know exactly where I'm going to hang it. Don't forget to sign it.'

'I won't,' said Mia. *Si tu t'imagines, fillette, fillette*, she murmured, smiling, as she rolled up the purple fabric to return to her model's keeping. At least I have the photos, she thought.

## Full Snow Moon

'So there are two questions,' called Cassie. 'We have to ask whether existence is a predicate, and then whether existence is a necessary predicate of an all-powerful and all-loving being.' She finished lining up the Frank Herberts and moved on to the Iain M. Banks's.

'Right,' called Justin from the living room.

'Then much later we have Rowe, who says we must distinguish between talking about predicates of a concept, and talking about whether or not a concept is instantiated.' She spoke at an ever-more normal volume as she heard Justin approaching. He was in the doorway now, holding a coffee machine. 'He uses the example of a hypothetical magician which exists, called a magico, and –'

'A hypothetical magician which exists?' said Justin.

'Yes, and a hypothet –'

'How can something hypothetical exist? What's the, the point?'

'You've almost hit the nail on the head, there.'

'Ah, but how many angels can dance on it?'

'Give me a chance,' said Cassie, grinning. 'So we have a hypothetical magician which exists, called a magico, and a hypothetical magician which does not exist, called a magican. Then –'

'I'm lost. A hypothetical magician which doesn't exist?'

'Yes.'

'Are you sure it isn't called a magican't?'

'You're not helping.' She grinned again.

'Sorry.'

She had opened all the window to let out the inexplicable smell of grass-fire that clouded every room, and in so doing let in the smell of chimney stacks. They were on the top floor of a four-storey tenement building in Marchmont, where Justin, having at last made good on his threat to move out of Cramond, was taking up lodgings with Rex. As Cassie continued to have nothing better to do during the day, she had offered to help him unpack. 'I'm not explaining this very well,' she said. 'Okay, imagine a dragon, right. You like dragons.'

'I do like dragons. Dragons are okay in my book.'

'Now imagine we have some other animal, a... a dinosaur. The one doesn't exist, and the other does.'

'Dinosaurs don't exist. They're extinct.'

'But they *did* exist. However, dragons never existed.'

'How can you say such a terrible thing?'

'Oh, dear...'

'In any case, I can show you several churchfuls of people who would be happy to inform you that dinosaurs never existed either, and that God planted their bones in the earth to test our faith.'

'Perhaps this is not the best example. Let's start again.'

'How about we take a break.' He was putting a CD in the freshly installed CD player. 'And close that window, won't you, it's bloody freezing.'

'The place needs an airing, Justin.'

'Listen to this horn section.'

Cassie listened. It was a nice horn section. She was approaching things from the wrong angle, she thought. Justin's mind was not built this way. If one thought of his head as one of those multicoloured hollow plastic cubes with the holes in different shapes that babies are given for their first birthday, she was trying to put star-shapes in moon-shaped holes.

She had thought to move on from the Cosmological Argument to the Irenaeus theodicy, but when he began declining the verb – *magico*, *magicas*, *magicat*, *magicamus*, *magicatus*, *magicant* – she gave up. 'Never mind,' she said. 'What *is* that smell?' It was worst in this room.

'It's the rising damp,' said Justin.'

'You moved into a place with rising damp?'

'We're not *buying* it. As soon as we move out it will be someone else's problem.'

'But you've only just moved in. And it smells funny right now.'

'So we'll light incense.'

'Incense is carcinogenic. This doesn't smell anything like damp, anyway. It smells like a grass-fire.'

'You still haven't answered my original question, by the way.'

'Which was?'

'Nice try. Do you believe in God?'

Cassie sighed. 'I don't know. Maybe.'

'You have half a masters in philosophy, and your answer is 'I don't know, maybe?'

'Yes,' said Cassie, *giggling*.

'What's that, the Keanu Reeves theodicy?'

'I used to be an atheist,' she said, almost defensively, as if to prove that she had in fact thought about it hard enough at some past point to have reached a less sophomoric conclusion.

'So did I,' said Justin. 'It was all the rage when I was twenty.'

They were back in the living room now. Justin was busy eviscerating his guitar case, plugging cables into Rex's amp.

'What are you doing?' said Cassie.

'I just want to check something quickly.'

'What do you want to check?'

'I just want to check and see what Rex's new wah pedal can do.'

'Ri-ight.' He was as distractable as a puppy. 'Why don't we just finish the kitchen first?'

'Hmm.'

Cassie sat down on a beanbag chair. 'So what happened?'

'To whom?'

'To your atheism.'

Justin shrugged. 'I met Lucas.'

'Who's that?' said Cassie.

'The eldest of the Strapping Carmichaels. I'm sure I've mentioned him before... What do you think of this chord sequence?'

'Beautiful,' said Cassie, who thought everything he played was beautiful. He played beautifully. What could one say. She envied him his passion; could not think of a single pursuit that could render her so single-mindedly self-absorbed, at least these days.

'It must be nice,' she said. 'To write a song. To make something from nothing.' He didn't respond for so long that she thought he must not have heard her, but presently he blew quietly to himself, and said, 'You do it too. You write.'

'That's not the same. I make nothing from something. I just break stuff down into its constituent parts and put them back together in a different way, mostly to show what's wrong with them. That's not art.'

She thought again of Felix, asking her if she still wrote.

Justin was gone again, hammering bass notes with his left hand and scribbling with his right. Cassie, no stranger to the temporary autism that could descend upon the musically engaged, rose to finish the kitchen herself. He would be checking something for the next three hours, she had no doubt.

She wrote well, Felix had said. But her sporadic attempts at real writing had all felt forced. Whether it was good or not, she had been faking it. She didn't have this well-spring, this flood that could not be checked, as Felix did, as Justin did.

'I don't know what to do,' said Cassie. 'I wish I could do what you do.'

It was not really the ability she envied him. It was the compulsion. Only a few days ago, Mia had written her an ecstatic email: she had sold her first painting. She too, was on her way, riding the tide of her own passion.

'That shouldn't be too difficult to arrange,' said Justin.

She turned. 'Eh?'

'The thought had crossed my mind, actually. I plan to be promoted soon. My spot will be opening up.'

'I wasn't talking about the pub, Justin.'

'Why not?'

'It's lovely of you to have thought of me. But I don't think I'm cut out for it.'

'Of course you are. You'll intimidate the socks off all the old boys. They'll love it.'

'I've never done that kind of work.'

'It's not rocket science. Fake it 'til you make it.'

She smiled. 'I'll think about it.'

She picked up a box of the crockery his mother had donated to him. But as she headed for the doorway, he spoke again. 'This is the way I see it, right.'

'What?'

'The problem of evil.'

'Oh, that.'

'In *The Lord of the Rings*...'

Ah, Justin's Bible. His angels were elves, his apostles were wizards, his David was the Last King of Westernesse. His St. John was a talking tree. It was a lovely thing. In a fifteen year old.

'No, hear me out, dammit,' said Justin.

'I didn't say a word.'

'Your face.' He laid the guitar across his crossed legs. 'In *The Lord of the Rings*, right, there's no God. In almost every fantasy book there's a god, or several. But, outside the *Silmarillion*, there's no god in the Tolkien mythos. However, there is something much like the devil: Sauron. The characters have to deal with him and his acts themselves. They never complain to a god about it.'

'Okay,' said Cassie, whose thoughts thus far on Sauron were that he was the most brilliantly, drastically blunt villain ever to emerge from modern literature, reduced to the bald signifiers of male potency, the Phallus and the Gaze, and that she would love to know what kind of relationship JRR Tolkien had with women.

'They never ask a god for help. And you never see a god. But he's there.'

'The Great Author,' said Cassie. 'Gotcha.'

'Yes! He's a tacit god. There's no *problem* of evil. All God needs to do to stop evil in its tracks is to stop writing, go off on a ramble in the countryside with CS Lewis and HV Dyson and discuss the use of assonance in *Beowulf*. He *could* have just written no Sauron, but then there would be no conflict. No conflict, no story.'

'The *dramatic* argument for the existence of God. Interesting.'

'You can borrow it if you like.'

'So that's why God never shows up these days,' said Cassie. 'It would be amateurish. It would make for bad reading. He's learnt that by the New Testament: he's gone Modernist, he effaces himself. If he chooses to assert his authorial presence, it's usually either to make a very forceful point, or as a sort of stylistic conceit.'

'Are you saying that a miracle is a stylistic conceit?' said Justin, smiling.

'Perhaps a miracle is a very forceful point,' said Cassie, who did not believe in miracles.

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When Art Tatum stepped into a club where Fats Waller was playing, Waller rose, surrendering his place. 'I only play the piano,' he said. 'But tonight God is in the house.'

'Was God on speed?' said Cassie, turning the volume down.

'I need the volume,' said Sam.

'Can't you get it on MP3 so you can at least wear headphones?'

'Then I won't be able to hear myself, duh.'

'Lucky you,' said Cassie.

Sam attempting to play *Tiger Rag* until she wanted to scream, until it went on playing in her head at night after they had gone to bed, until, at last, mercifully, she couldn't hear it any more, until the 370 beats per minute of seemingly incoherent frenzy, Art Tatum on the turntable and Sam Loudon Jr. on the baby grand, became white noise.

Bugger, bugger, BUGGER, BUGGER. BUGGER.

I bet you nobody could even tell if you're making a mistake, said Cassie.

I can tell.

That piece sounds like it's got epilepsy.

This piece is genius.

She had never heard him working so hard on a piece that wasn't for class. She had never seen Sam so possessed.

All she wanted, in those days, was an occasional silence.

Sammy?

Sam?

SAM!

What?

Just an hour, please, just an hour, just two hours, no music, I just want to finish this essay, you can play all weekend.

We're going to your mom's on the weekend.

Just half an hour, no jazz, please.

At last she took her books and left the house to work in peace. When she came home four hours later, it was as if not a second had passed. He did not even greet her when she walked in. She had to bully him into breaking for supper.

The next day was the same. This time, when she came home, Cassie removed the record from the turntable and turned off the power at the wall. Sam went on playing.

If she simply stopped coming home, she wondered aloud, would it be days or weeks before he noticed?

He gave her his half-smile. 'You know, sometimes I almost think you're jealous.'

'Don't be absurd.'

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The people who had lived in number six before Justin and Rex moved in had been from Christ Church, New Zealand. They had returned to New Zealand in haste and under duress, having been not only evicted from the building, but deported from the country, on both counts due to their involvement in an electrical fire caused by a short in the equipment that regulated the temperature of the hydroponic weed they had been cultivating in the ceiling.

The short had been caused by the rising damp.

Instead of calling the fire brigade, the sole tenant who was home at the time the fire broke out had immediately taken as many valuables (i.e. duffel bags of dried and packed weed) as he could carry, thrown them from the balcony into street outside, then gone back for more. By the time he came back to the balcony with the second load of valuables, the first load had already been stolen.

Rex had the truth of this from his new landlord, and he loved the story so much that he was threatening to begin telling it in the first person. He, unlike Cassie and Justin, had immediately identified the grass-fire smell in the apartment as the residue of a large quantity of tragically overdone skunk.

Rex, wearing a dressing gown and a purple velvet pimp hat he had acquired on tour, was retelling the tale to Aaltje, Eliska and Martin, while at the same time doing a creditable impression of Jay Kay.

'I will not have that music under my roof,' said Justin. He removed Jamiroquai from the playlist.

'It's my computer,' said Rex.

'They're my speakers.'

'This is my half of the living-room.'

'You don't even *like* Jamiroquai.'

'How do you know?'

'Because we wouldn't be friends if you did.'

Rex nodded. 'Fair enough.'

'It was my fault,' Eliska admitted. 'I just put it on because of the hat.'

Aaltje and Eliska were sitting together on the couch with their heads bowed over a newspaper, and now Rex sat down beside them. Cassie took the pimp hat from his head and placed it on her own. In Justin's care, the playlist had been ceded to David Bowie, and she began dancing to the first few bars

of *Lady Stardust*. It was not music one could really dance to, but they were drinking White Russians, and David Bowie was an important element in the small cross-section of modern music that Cassie associated with no-one other than herself, and she was in a very good mood.

'Look at that,' said Rex. 'The wee gerl has some moves, Silveira. Bring it this way, lassie.' He slouched down in his seat, revealing rather more of his Y-fronts than was necessary.

Justin didn't look. He was singing along absently, and yet still better than David Bowie, interrupting himself to hurl the occasional oath at the computer screen. 'This is fucked up,' he said.

'What are you playing?' said Rex.

'Sudoku,' said Aaltje.

'Not you.'

'*Warcraft III*,' said Justin. 'The Human Mage is far too powerful. I don't know what they were thinking.'

'What have you got up against him?'

'Tauran chieftain.'

'Try a warstomp.'

'I have. He's already regenerated his manna and now he's summoned three flipping water elementals. My knights have been slaughtered.'

'Flipping?' said Rex.

Justin's phone rang and he turned down the music to answer it. 'Yo. Yeah. We're at the new place... Just the usual lot. Aaltje and them. And Cassie. And Rex of course... well, no, it's not a party, it was spur-of-the-moment. Of course you're invited, duh.' She heard him giving whoever was on the other end the address. 'Um, well, since you're offering. Just a couple sixpacks of Carlings and whatever you girls will want... What? Yes, he's here. Hang on, I'll ask him. Martin? Whose got Danny tonight? Martin? What are you doing?'

Martin had his head out the window. 'Have a look,' he said.

It was not much snow, but it was snow. Cassie, beside him at the window, was beaming. 'I want to go out in it.'

'What for?' said Martin.

'I never have.'

'Been in snow?'

'No.'

'Well, good gracious, lass. Outside with you.'

They put on their jackets and went out to watch Cassie being snowed on. Eliska, known to be volubly dismissive of what the Scots called winter, courted disaster by coming outside in a t-shirt.

'Oh, are you *too warm*?' said Martin. 'Eliska's *too warm*, Justin.' He held her arms behind her back while Justin piled snow down her front. Eliska screamed laughter and kicked with her scarecrow legs.

Cassie tried to make a snow-ball and discovered it was not as easy as she had thought it would be. It was not the right kind of snow, Aaltje said. But she tried anyway, and was throwing the results at Justin, when Rex, who had elected to stay upstairs, poked his head through window. 'Oi! Cassie!'

Cassie peered up. Rex was brandishing her mobile phone.

'It's your mum,' he said. 'Can you catch?'

'Um.'

'I'll catch it,' said Justin. Rex dropped Cassie's mum off the balcony and into Justin's waiting hands. He passed the phone to Cassie.

'Mom?'

'Cassie! Who answered the phone?' said Nathalie Harris.

'Rex. A mate of ours.'

'He sounded Scottish.'

'He is. How did you get this number?'

There was a brief silence during which she thought she had lost the connection. 'Oh, I'm sorry, is it a *private* number?' said Nathalie.

'No, it is not a private number, I am merely curious,' said Cassie.

'You emailed it to me.'

'Oh, yes.'

'Am I interrupting something?' said Nathalie. She could probably hear Eliska screaming. Martin was still chasing her around the car with handfuls of snow.

'Not really. I'm at a housewarming party,' said Cassie. 'It's snowing,' she added, more to explain the noise than for the sake of conversation.

'Snowing! Really? I don't remember much snow in London.'

'I'm in Edinburgh.'

'You're still in Edinburgh?'

They had not communicated since Christmas. Cassie walked away to stand in the entrance of the building. Her fingers had gone red from trying to make a snowball.

'Is this your own housewarming party?' said Nathalie.

'No. I'm still staying with Dad.' She prepared herself to be defensive.

'When are you going back to London?'

'Not sure yet.' She didn't want to leave Edinburgh. She liked the Scots. She liked the flat. She liked Justin. She liked Justin's friends. She liked snow. She liked the pimp hat.

'Do you have any idea what you're going to *do* yet?'

'I'm waiting to hear back from the recruitment agency.'

Cassie heard an engine, and she peered through the flurries of white. A Volkswagen was pulling up next to Rex's car. Susannah got out the driver's side, Tanya came out the passenger side. Each held a shopping bag.

'Well, I'll let you get back to your party. Please do let me know what you're up to.'

'I will. Sorry.' At least she could say sorry for that much.

Susannah was wearing black mukluks, knee-highs, a black skirt and a spotted faux fur coat. She looked lovely as a snow-leopard with her fur and her long red hair and her red mouth and her white face. Cassie watched as she greeted Justin and Aaltje and Martin.

'The Cheetarah coat!' she heard Rex exclaim from the balcony. 'I can't believe you still have it.'

Susannah waved up to him, and went indoors. Everyone followed her. Possibly they were following the liquor, but still.

'I miss you,' said Nathalie Harris, throwing her daughter.

'I miss you, too,' said Cassie.

She asked after Cape Town, said goodbye, and then began mounting the stairs back up to number six, feeling bad on too many levels to count. Mostly, she felt bad because she had not called since Christmas. The reasons she had not called since Christmas had remained safely unenumerated, but that did nothing to stave off the most immediate guilt. It had not occurred to her, until now, that her mother might be lonely.

When Cassie re-entered the living room, it was as if the evening's continuity editor had fallen asleep on the job. The music had changed, everyone had different drinks in their hands, and Susannah was wearing the pimp hat. The purple velvet and the cheetah pelt greeted each other like a long lost friends. Cassie put her hand to her own head in confusion, forgetting she had left it upstairs.

'God, is it just me, or does this stuff all sound egregiously nineties now?' said Justin.

'Turn it off, turn it off,' said Susannah, as Justin laughed. 'My breath control is appalling. Who came up with these lyrics?'

'You did,' said Rex.

David Bowie's voice had been usurped by Susannah's own, emanating not only from her body but from the speakers: they were listening to some early tracks from the repertoire of Scheherezade.

Somewhere in the five minutes that Cassie was outside alone, talking to her mother, it had become a party. Unsociable pursuits like Sudoku and Warcraft III were a distant memory. Cassie would have liked to believe it was just because the two extra people and the fresh injection of booze had made critical mass, but she knew this wasn't so.

An hour later, Justin was on his way to drunkenness, and proportionately affectionate, lying with his head in Cassie's lap and his feet up on the couch between Aaltje and Eliska, singing along with himself of four years earlier and ad-libbing over Rex's guitar part on an acoustic that lay across his stomach like a pet.

Cassie knew his demonstrativeness towards her was caused by Susannah's presence, not to provoke jealousy, but to offset an earlier display of affection towards her. He had, twenty minutes earlier, thrown himself lengthwise across Susannah where she sat on the couch, like an Irish Wolfhound endearingly unaware of its own age and weight. He was ingenuously tactile at the most clear-headed of times, and in neither case could it be called flirting. But for the ingenuously tactile all boundaries are easily blurred, and Cassie wanted no part in it. She lifted his head from her lap, thoughtful enough to replace her legs with a cushion.

His ex-girlfriend was now taking photos of the gathering with her cell-phone camera. Aaltje and Martin dancing. Eliska and Tanya with their arms draped around one another. Tanya laughing as Rex told her the story about the hydroponic weed.

She aimed the camera phone at Justin. It would be a great photo, thought Cassie. He looked so like himself.

'I want one of everyone,' said Susannah. 'Cassie, will you take it for us?'

And there was nothing, absolutely nothing she could do but smile graciously and ask which button to press.

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When Mia was feeling anxious, she liked to find a place with a view, sit quietly, choose a colour – red, say – and then concentrate on that colour so hard that everything else receded into camouflage shades, leached of significance, and one's eye leaped from red to red until all one could see was a stop-sign, a billboard, a phone booth, and a pair of red Wellington boots flashing through puddles as the grey child who wore them ran pell-mell down the street towards the bus stop.

Mia was feeling anxious.

Here comes the bus, she thought. She drew on her cigarette, leaning up against the strip of brick wall by the window of Matt's balcony and watching as the schoolhouse across the road from his flat complex emptied itself of pupils.

The London kids were thugs, most of them, those just past the Wellington boots age; foul-mouthed and terrier-eyed. She supposed they were a product of their environment, but having suffered more than her fair share of the tender mercies of foul-mouthed, terrier-eyed brats of both sexes during her own secondary education, she found it hard to sympathise. Matt had beckoned her to this window once to point out a woman standing out on the school's fire escape, crying and smoking. 'She's often out there,' he said. 'Often on a Friday. I think her worst classes are on Fridays.'

She was there again now, the teacher; tears absent, rollie smoke present. Mia could only tell it was a rollie because she had rolled it right there on the stairs, struggling valiantly in the blustery weather. The teacher looked up and saw Mia, fellow smoker, sometime fellow victim of the tyranny of thirteen year old boys. Mia raised a hand and waved. The woman waved back with her smoking hand and the wind snatched the cherry and flipped it burning into her clothes. She batted at herself, relit the cigarette.

Mia tossed the last quarter of her own onto the pavement below and ducked back under the sash window into Matt's living-room.

She started fretting anew about her apparel, even though Fillette had said it was an informal party.

To save herself three line changes in the five o'clock crush, Mia had come straight here to Lambeth after work, from whence she and Matt would proceed directly to Fillette's flat. That morning, in a moment of self-loathing which she now bitterly regretted, she had forestalled another dress-up extravaganza by packing nothing more elaborate than an extra pair of shoes.

Fighting the urge to go and check on her reflection in the mirror again, she curled into the corner of the couch that wasn't already taken up by Davy's debris and picked up the A5 sketch pad that went with her everywhere.

She had already spent as much time as she could excusably spend on getting ready for dinner, and, to occupy herself until Matt came home, she had commenced a study for *The Lovers*. It was the sixth of the trumps, and her favourite: the only card that didn't feel lonely.

Some decks, she knew, represented this card as Love, rather than The Lovers, with Eros taking the place of the libidinous couple. Other decks kept the name, but had a man and two women, or sometimes a man, a woman and Eros together. But Mia liked the conventional monogamous soul-mates, unhindered by Peeping-Tom deities. Her Fool had had a weary journey of it, and there were many miles yet to come. He deserved this moment's respite; the elation of washing up on the shore of his beloved's body. They were lost in each other's eyes, as it should be.

She heard the clanging of feet on the echoey iron stairwell that ran up from the atrium to this wing of the flat complex. There was a rattle of metal against metal – keys, she guessed, run across the handrail for the sake of it – and she knew it couldn't be Matt. He abhorred unnecessary noise, especially if he was the one generating it; wouldn't so much as step on a creaky floorboard in a strange house more than once, let alone belt out a rendition of *Cry me a River* that left three levels ringing. By the time the singer reached their floor and the part about Wade Robson there was no doubt that it was Davy.

What is it about some people, that they feel the need or the freedom to expand beyond the confines of their bodies, while others seek only to contain themselves? Mia wondered. A glance around the apartment revealed the material equivalent. Outside his bedroom, there was hardly any evidence at all that Matt lived here. It was Davy's screensaver on the flat-screen TV, Davy's manga porn collection in the shelf below it. Davy's PC on the living room table (Matt's was in his own room), with Davy's CDs scattered around it. His gym-bag on the couch beside her, his near-sentient sweats beginning to crawl out of it of their own volition. And it was Davy's mates who arrived in guffawing phalanxes to watch footy, to play with Davy's X-Box, Davy's i-Pod. In the bathroom, his products. His pubic hair trimmings in the drain. In the kitchen, his unwashed plates and bowls attracting ants. (I'll wash them, said Matt. Why don't you tell him to wash them himself? Said Mia. I have, I will, he nodded.)

She heard Davy swearing as he dropped his keys. She supposed it would be polite to get up and unlock for him. Instead, she stretched out on the couch in a more decisively recumbent pose, to make it look as if that would have been far too much to have expected of herself.

'All right, Mimi,' said Davy, having shouldered his way through the door with a bag of groceries under each arm.

'Thought that was you pretending to be Justin Timberlake pretending to be black.'

He dropped the bags of food on the living-room floor. 'Matt in?'

'Not yet.'

Davy threw himself down on the recliner and switched on the TV with the remote. 'Like, are you two going to be here tonight?' he said, in a way that indicated that he hoped the answer would be no.

'Why, is Shamille coming round?'



Davy threw her a baleful look. '*Sharon* is coming round. We're making fondue.'

Is that what the kids are calling it these days, thought Mia. 'Shamille' was her collective term for Davy's two interchangeable bottle-blond girlfriends, Sharon and Camille, both of whom had independently assured Mia that they were 'just mates' with Davy, and both of whom she had encountered in the corridor numerous times as they disappeared tittering into or out of his bedroom at all hours of the night. They were never there at the same time.

'That's fine,' said Mia. 'We're going out to dinner.'

Mia checked the wall clock. They would leave in an hour, or they would if Matt showed up in time. Her carefully soothed unease started bashing against the walls again.

Tonight was the night of the Great Unveiling. Mia wished Fillette wouldn't call it that. She generally wished Fillette wasn't so hell bent on making a big deal of it, although she knew that, practically speaking, she should be glad of the exposure.

'It's just a painting,' she had said.

'It's a painting by *you*,' Fillette had answered. (It's a painting of *me*, Mia translated for her.) 'Besides which, darling, it's just a get-together with some old friends. You won't be asked to perform like a trained seal, or anything.'

Unfortunately, once Fillette had said it, Mia had not been able to get rid of the notion that this was exactly what she was in for. Exposure. That was the problem. She was proud of her work, but she didn't like the idea of trying to explain it to a roomful of strangers, or of being asked questions; of somehow being *caught out*. Exposed. Of what, she wasn't sure.

Fillette had come to pick up the painting a few days earlier. When she put it in the back seat of her car and drove away, Mia had been struck unexpectedly by the anguish of a mother seeing her child off to its first day at nursery school. *Love is proved in the letting go*. Aside from the portrait of Cassie she had made all those years ago, it was the only piece she had ever allowed to pass out of her hands.

It was also the first piece she had ever been paid for.

She had suggested a very modest sum, which Fillette unhesitatingly doubled. 'Don't sell yourself short,' she had admonished.

'But you're a friend,' Mia protested lamely.

'Business is business. Besides, do you think I want to own a cheap painting?' said Fillette. 'By charging more, you make your customer feel like they've bought something worth having.' She smiled her new smile. 'Trust me. Victor says I'm a formidable businesswoman.'

So it's 'Victor' now, thought Mia.

He would be there tonight. The thought was enough to send Mia to the window for another cigarette.

'What's this then?' she heard Davy say as she tugged at the sash window. She turned to see him looking at her notepad, which she had imprudently left open on the armrest of the couch.

She long-jumped the distance from the window-sill to the couch. 'That's none of your business,' she said.

'Dirty pictures Mia, really. What a way to squander your talents.'

'Give it to me.' She reached for the notepad, but he held it beyond her reach, rising from his seat and pivoting his hefty body away from her as if they were playing one-on-one.

'Who's the bloke?' he said.

'What?'

'Well the girl is obviously you. But who -'

'It's nobody. And the girl is *not* me. Give it to me!'

He was hyuck-hyucking loutishly, viewing the drawing from the end of one out-stretched arm while he used the other to ward her off. When he grabbed hold of her wrist, she fell abruptly silent, and kicked him very hard in the kneecap.

'Jesus *Christ*, Mia!' he bellowed, dropping the notepad and turning to face her with flashing eyes.

'What the badgery fuck was that for?'

She met his gaze, knowing she had overreacted, but too angry to apologise. He opened his mouth, shut it again. 'You're mental, you know that?' he said, and when it was clear that no answer was forthcoming, he shook his head and turned to go to his room. He didn't seem to be limping too much.

Mia picked up the notepad, smoothed down a bent corner. She took it out to the balcony with her, and looked again at the nude pair, at their locked eyes. She knew Davy was wrong about the girl being modelled on herself, because she'd expressly modelled her on Olivia Hussey, and she didn't look anything like Olivia Hussey.

There was a sound of keys jangling outside. This time she did go through to unlock the door. 'Did you remember the wine?' she said as soon as she had opened it.

Matt blinked, and then laughed. 'Hello,' he said.

'Hello.' She kissed him perfunctorily. 'Did you remember the wine?'

He held up a shopping bag, which clinked reassuringly. His eyes went to her cigarette, and followed the trail of smoke upwards as if there might be a punch-line at the end of it. 'I wasn't smoking inside,' said Mia. 'I just came in to open for you.'

'What on earth happened to your nails?'

'I've been chewing them. I had to cut them really short to fix the ends.'

He took her non-smoking hand and flattened Mia's fingers out on his palm. 'There's hardly anything of them left,' he said. 'You're not nervous about tonight, are you?'

'Of course not.'

He put his shopping bag down next to the ones Davy had left by the door. 'Everyone will adore you, Miatjie,' he said, putting his arms around her.

They'd had something of an issue about pet names earlier on in their still-young relationship. Specifically, the problem that he was unwilling or unable to adopt any. When she could no longer

abide being called 'Mia' by her own boyfriend, he had at last lit upon the Afrikaans diminutive, finding it a tragic omission that there was no real equivalent in his own language. Once he discovered that it could be applied to things other than names, he was hooked: these days, not only was she Miatjie, but they often went to see a filmtjie or eat a pizzatjie before going to bedtjie to have a naptjie. She sank against him.

'What if they think I'm silly?' she said.

'Um,' said Matt. 'Then we'll take our business elsewhere. Let's sample one of these bottles, shall we? Make sure it's not poisoned.'

'All right.' She realised belatedly that he was becoming nervous too, on her behalf, perhaps, and that made her feel less nervous.

By the time they arrived at Fillette's she was herself again. She even thought she looked decent enough. She was wearing chinos, but at least they were black, and the heels dressed them up nicely, and her shirt was... well, it had buttons, and it was clean. She also had the ox-blood jacket, and had thankfully not been so rash that morning as to deny herself the wherewithal to make her hair and face look good.

'You look beautiful,' said Matt encouragingly as they climbed the stairs to Fillette's condominium. 'And it's just a casual thing, right?' he added, somewhat less encouragingly, as Mia rang the doorbell.

Fillette opened the door in five-inch diamante stilettos, a white-gold-and-diamond cuff bracelet, and a strapless silk charmeuse bias-cut sheath.

'Good Lord,' said Matt under his breath. His next words were lost as he was shrouded in an enthusiastic Davidoff-scented air-embrace.

'Matthew!' Fillette was exclaiming. 'I've so looked forward to meeting you.'

'Please, Matt,' said Matt. Quite what he was asking of himself Mia wasn't sure, but she didn't have time to think about that. She was momentarily speechless. Fillette's dress was of a rich purple colour that she was more than a little familiar with. She could mix that colour blindfolded. She could paint those highlights. She *had* painted those highlights.

'You didn't,' said Mia.

'I did!' said Fillette. She did a little turn. There was not much of a back to the dress.

'Just for you,' said Fillette. 'I thought it would be a nice touch.' She stood aside to let them in. 'You'll have to explain our joke to your man, Mia darling, he looks lost.'

'Our joke' indeed, thought Mia, noticing by the overhead light in the foyer that her shirt was not in fact entirely clean. There was a blotch of carrier oil just underneath her left nipple. As for Matt, 'lost' was the least of it. He was studying Fillette with a mixture of awe and puzzlement.

'How does it stay up?' he said in Mia's ear.

'Tape,' Mia breathed dourly. 'Tape.'

The rest of the guests – about twenty, all told – were not unadorned either. Although Fillette walked among them as a fabulous multilimbed Hindu deity walks among the denizens of a stuffy western pantheon, they looked as if they belonged – if not with her, then at least near her. All of the women, and some of the men, wore jewellery that could have comfortably been arranged in a display case around Fillette's cuff bracelet. The younger women were in cocktail dresses, the older women in designer pants suits. The men wore either sober, well-tailored shirts and pants or extravagantly impractical catwalk outfits of the type that one only sees on rock stars and gay designers. (Mia noticed that the men in this garb were also the ones wearing the jewellery, and put two and two together.) There were three or four girls that Mia knew at a glance to be models, firstly from the fact that they were all a foot taller than she was, and secondly from the way they carried their hip bones well ahead of the rest of their bodies.

'They build them that way to put drinks trays down on,' said a voice behind her. Mia turned to see Sebastian, slouched in the gap between the wall and the sliding door, once again dressed in black jeans and a black V-neck jersey. He stepped out beside her and mimicked the models' all-purpose socialising pose. 'Folds up easily for overhead storage,' he said.

Mia laughed. 'If you stand like that outside Soho House you'll be snapped up by Kenzo in ten minutes flat,' she said.

'Heaven forefend,' said Sebastian. 'Is this your other half, then?'

Mia was introducing Matt and Sebastian to each other when Fillette shimmered into their midst. 'Oh Seb,' she said. 'You might have put on a decent shirt. Excuse me, Matthew, darling, while I borrow your girlfriend for a bit.' Mia glanced over her shoulder as she was shepherded away to meet a celebrated restaurateur. She was worried about leaving Matt alone. He looked such a fish out of water.

The transformation in Fillette's persona around this crowd of 'old friends' was unnerving. Fillette was not the worst of them – she declined to shriek, or coo, or flounce- but there were a great number of 'marvelous's,' and 'divines,' and plying the members of both genders and all three sexual persuasions with air-kisses. There was also a notable shortage of rolling nods, blessings, and no mention whatsoever of the All That Is.

Mia, at eye level for the most part with shoulders and cleavages, was happy to remain inconspicuous. Exposure or not, she was relieved when Fillette introduced Mia only as her 'colleague'. It appeared that, if the painting was going to feature at all at this party, it would be as part of the background.

She had to go and take a look, though. Just to see whether it felt at home. Fillette had told her where it had been hung: in the dining room, above the mantelpiece. As soon as she was able, she detached herself from Fillette and went inside. Glancing around to check on Matt's whereabouts, she spotted him out in the hall beyond the kitchen, safely ensconced in conversation with Sebastian. Matt was pointing at the ceiling fixtures, and Sebastian was leaning against the wall, nodding, with his arms crossed over his chest like a bas relief on the tomb of a Knight Templar.

At the doorway to the dining room, Mia stopped, trying to suppress a twinge of possessive pride. Now she was a mother seeing her child perform her first piano recital, up on the stage, all alone, and so grownup about it.

The painting was not in fact veiled, and Mia grasped the opportunity to see it with fresh eyes. Standing against the far wall for the sake of retaining an impression of the totality of the piece, she tried to imagine herself away from her work and see it as an objective viewer might.

The style, she observed, was largely naturalistic. It owed, perhaps, a little to the Fauves in its use of colour planes, although the palette was far more subdued, and a little to Gauguin in terms of composition, although the contours were not so overbearing. There was also, conversely, something of the Pre-Raphaelites in the treatment of the human form, though this may have been a natural property of the model more than the choice of the artist.

The subject was timeless: a nude reclining. Reclining, yet not relaxed: she was perfectly self-contained, the regal carriage of the neck and shoulders suggesting an ingrained habit of poise. Austere... almost. Dispassionate... and yet. The feet, those most disobedient of extremities, far more honest than hands, told all. The toes of the left were splayed enquiringly, the sole of the right curled towards the viewer to allow a big toe to scratch the opposite arch. Lively, probing, sensuous; her feet were the only parts of her that betrayed her involvement in the volume that lay open upon her knee. Once one noticed the feet, it was possible to re-evaluate the upright bearing of her torso, and the slight tension that pulled one of her eyebrows into a narrower angle than the other, as symptoms of an all-consuming engagement in the shattering twist or breathless climax she was reading.

Engraved on a little plaque that the owner had had attached to the frame, was the title of the piece: *She Gets to the Good Part*. There was no name. Mia had, after all, neglected to sign it.

There were a few people in the dining room already, and Mia now noticed that she was not the only one studying the painting. A man in a double-breasted suit was looking at it, tumbler in hand. A well-kept middle-aged, shaggy-haired, Depardieu-chested, he was standing across the dining room table from the painting, and was to all appearances thoroughly absorbed by what he saw. He might just like looking at naked girls, she told herself. But something about the way he rocked back and forth on his heels, swilling his whisky, made Mia feel that he was not merely looking, but admiring, appraising, approving. Perhaps he was a collector. Or better yet, a dealer, or a curator... He looked over in her direction, tilted his head back in a reverse-nod, and gave her a smile of such evident approbation that she flushed and beamed back, confused for a moment into believing that he knew the work was hers.

Then Fillette swept into the room with a '*There you are!*', and Mia flushed several shades deeper. There was nothing worse than returning a smile meant for someone else. Specifically, there was nothing worse than returning a smile from a multi-millionaire that was meant for someone infinitely taller and purpler and more elegant than oneself.

She was surprised to find that Rudolph Victor Adamus was clearly a good deal older than Fillette: when Fillette had said she had known him since she was a little girl, she had assumed that that meant also since he was a little boy, and had imagined them, fondly, as childhood sweethearts.

Fillette had somehow managed to suck Mia into her slipstream as she approached, so that they arrived side by side before him. Victor Adamus placed one hand in the small of Fillette's back, and with the other he touched the bauble on her wrist, smiling in an oh-so-you-wore-it-did-you way. Mia wondered which one of them had chosen it. There was no need to wonder who had paid for it.

'Victor,' said Fillette. 'This is Mia de Villiers.' Her eyes were shining as she gazed upon him. Not just her eyes. Perhaps it was the effect of the chandelier on her astonishing dress, but it seemed to Mia that her entire being had taken on a charged bioluminescence. Rudolph Victor Adamus turned his shaggy head, and his full attention, towards Mia. Once she had it, she was not sure she wanted it. It made her feel heavy. His eyes were very dark, approximately the same shade as Matt's, but while Matt's eyes made one think of cool, liquid things, like shaded water, Victor Adamus's made one think of hot, solid things, like igneous rock. He offered his hand. 'Miss de Villiers,' he said, pronouncing her surname the French way. 'Your reputation precedes you.' He looked intently at the painting. 'True promise,' he said. 'True promise.'

'Thank you,' said Mia. She wished she could think of something intelligent to say about the painting, but she found that the details of her exegesis, collected so incisively scant minutes earlier, had fled her.

'I've called everyone in to dinner,' said Fillette. 'I don't know where that brother of mine has disappeared to, so I'm afraid you'll have to play the seating host, Victor, while I go and see what's happening in the kitchen.'

She left the room. Victor Adamus turned to face Mia again and formed his mouth into the position to say 'ah,' or 'ha,' but he failed to follow through with the actual syllable for so long that Mia involuntarily made an ah-mouth herself, to encourage him, as it were. He clamped his own shut and lowered his head to look at the place-card on the table in front of him as abruptly as if it had started ringing. 'Hm,' he said.

'Hmm,' agreed Mia, and looked at the place-card in front of her. *Gerard*, it suggested in unctuous copper-plate.

There were two tables in the room; the long one that lived here, and a round one that had been shifted in from the lounge. Mia looked for her place-card and saw that she was at the smaller of the two, with Matt, Sebastian, and four others whose names she vaguely remembered from the introductions. *Cordoba*, she read. *Unité*. Good grief. The kiddies table, she thought. Victor Adamus turned his eyes to her again. 'I don't know most of these people,' he said. 'I only have one friend here, besides Fillette.'

'Me too.' She smiled, and then laughed, amused at the grade school lexicon of the exchange.

Victor Adamus laughed as well. It sounded strangely effortful, like a heavy piece of furniture was being shifted in his chest. 'Well,' he said. 'They'll just have to seat themselves then, and we'll look after each other. Let me pour you some more wine.'

There were two open reds, but he picked up a third dusty bottle from amongst the selection. 'I'm something of an art lover myself, you know,' he said, wringing its throat.

'Fillette mentioned that,' said Mia.

'Oh?' said Victor. 'Did she tell you about our new community project?'

'Bloody hell, is that Fillette?'

Mia turned at the glottal stop the speaker had made out of the last syllable of Fillette's name, to see one of the models entering the room and staring open mouthed at the painting.

The rest of the company seethed amiably in behind her, Matt among them. He came to stand beside her and smiled, rubbing her shoulder and taking in the painting with a theatrical sigh of appreciation. He had seen it only once before, in her kitchen, a week or so before it was finished. She smiled back, but at the same time she swatted his hand away from her shoulder. She could not have said why she did it. It was not the hand that had annoyed her, it was the smile, or the sigh. Or perhaps it was indeed the hand. Or all three. She was probably just tense. So many rich people. Her painting. The spot on her shirt. There was Sebastian, tossing his hair out of his face as he walked into the room. He glanced at the painting, made a squeamish face at the sight of his sister naked, but didn't appear surprised. Of course, he would have seen it before. But not everyone had, and there were further squeals of various frequencies and emotional emphases when those who hadn't entered the dining-room in twos and threes. At each such exclamation, Mia felt someone looking her way; Matt, then Victor Adamus, then Sebastian. Cool eyes, and hot, and dancing. Her skin fairly tingled.

She sat down to table with trepidation, having realised how myopic it had been of her to imagine that a three-foot-by-two image of their hostess's naked body looming over them while they ate would conceivably be 'part of the background' to the guests.

Hardly had the first course been served when Mia noticed the face of the celebrated restaurateur doddering between the painting and Fillette's real-life, silk-enclosed bosom. 'I say, Filly,' he neighed. 'It's rather unfair of you to have that thing dangling over us. How's a chap supposed to concentrate on his meal?'

'I will be moving it to my bedroom soon,' said Fillette. 'But since we're not in polite company, I thought I might show it off tonight -' she paused for effect, and aimed her sumptuous smile slowly and meaningfully in Mia's direction - 'considering that we have the artist present.'

As one, all the heads at both tables swung in the direction of Fillette's short, drab, foreign colleague. Mia de Villiers, she almost said aloud, as a scattering of creased brows and eyes moving to the right indicated to her that some of them were trying to remember her name.

Then, as she expected, the heads swung back towards the painting, suddenly looking - really looking - for the first time.

She felt the upper half of her stomach trying to plunge down towards the ground in the hopes of being swallowed by it, but at the same time, the lower half was filling with a warm red glow. She knew that the reason the eyes were lingering on the painting was that they were now seeing not a finished product, but a process; imagining her hand at work. In her presence, the lacuna between painting and painter had been breached, and the work thus transmuted into pre-emptive performance art. They were responding as they might to a dancer or an acrobat: *Gosh, I can't do that.*

Or perhaps they were just intrigued by the thought that she had daubed the contours of Fillette Maddox's naked breasts.

As if at a signal, there was a zoological hubbub of 'bloody marvellous' and 'look at that gorgeous drapery!' Mia heard one 'I want to be painted naked, too!' from a male voice.

'Who are you with?' a man called from the other table. He was a photographer, she remembered, a nattily dressed man with hawkish features who was sitting in the place marked 'Gerard'. Or was Gerard the well-rounded one with the blow-dried moustache one seat along? Either way, Mia was not sure she knew what he meant. Following her first instinct, she glanced towards Matt, and knew immediately, when this action solicited a smile of amused compassion from an esteemed fashionista, that she had guessed wrong.

'I mean who represents you,' said the hawkish photographer in a slow, clear voice, which she hoped she could take to mean that he suspected she didn't speak English very well. Rather than be thought ignorant. Rather anything.

'Mia doesn't have an agent or a dealer yet, Gerard,' Fillette answered for her. 'This was the first piece she ever sold.'

No doubt she meant it well. And the company responded well; producing a fresh eruption of bleats and warbles. But Mia could hear the change in the tone of this second volley; could see the cloying kindness in their eyes, and she felt the glow in her stomach turn to a cold sludge. For a few minutes, somewhere between the first remark on the painting and the last, she had been the thing that attracted this set the most: someone it was good to know about, and even better to know. And now she was nobody.

The hot eyes were on her again. Looking across to the long table to meet Victor's heavy gaze, she saw that its weight had not changed in the slightest. His face was thoughtful. Sebastian was looking at him with intense interest.

'Is the human form your forte, Miss de Villiers?' he said.

'Mia,' said Mia.

'Mia. What else do you paint?'

'Whatever grabs me,' said Mia, feeling pretentious before the words had even left her mouth. She couldn't pull a phrase like that off, not now. The room was terribly still, all off-shoot conversations having been damped down by the cross-table exchange.

'Do you ever do abstract art?'

Once. 'Not really.'



The other diners were still politely, expectantly silent. Nobody seemed to know whose turn it was to speak. Victor was studying his dinner plate. His largely untouched carpaccio cowered beneath his gaze.

Then he looked at Fillette. 'Fillette,' he said. 'I'll give you ten thousand pounds for the painting.'

There was a pause, and everyone around the table laughed at the double joke: partly he was teasing Fillette, and partly he was ribbing Mia, who would be aghast to think of what might have been her own profit.

'I'll give you twenty!' said the celebrated restaurateur, wishing he had thought of it himself. 'I need something for the smoking section in my Chelsea branch.'

But while Victor smiled at their response, he did not laugh, and the smile was an impatient one. A little frown appeared above it when the company did not quiet down quickly enough. 'Fifty,' he said to Fillette.

'Boys, you are all too silly,' said Fillette. 'It's my painting.'

The guests were still roaring. Awoo hoo hoo hoo, they went, looking at Mia to see if she would provide a rejoinder while the gap for one was still ajar. She lowered her eyes and tried to smile. The sight of the raw meat before her was making the cold sludge stir around in her stomach. Was it really such a hilarious notion that her work should be worth something? She tried to think of something wittily self-deprecating to say.

Instead, she jumped in her seat and gave a strangled cry, a sensation of coldness and wetness spreading over her thighs.

'Oops,' said Sebastian, sitting to her left. He had spilled three inches of Cab Sav in her lap.

'Seb, you clot!' said Fillette. She rose. 'Come on Mia, let's get you sorted out.'

'Sorry,' Sebastian called after them lightly as they left the room.

Mia tried to shake off the thickness in her throat as she followed Fillette's bare back and iridescent behind towards the aft of the apartment. She felt a complete idiot in her sodden chinos. No fool like a wet fool. It was her own fault, she knew, for having allowed herself to be desire their approval.

She had not seen Fillette's bedroom before, and she put her ignominy on a back-burner as she took in the contrast to the rest of the place. Whereas the other rooms were all white and taupe and tiles and leather, this room was full of soft, textured things draped over every available surface in a riot of yellows and oranges and rust red, and it smelled of incense and flower essences, a bit like Mia's own room. The fabrics and furniture looked Eastern. From her time in India, Mia guessed, picturing Fillette wafting through vibrant, sun-cracked markets in a sari. And there were books here after all. Two long shelves of them. A few novels, travel guides, and business books, but mostly they were alternative self-help or holistic life-style books. The Dalai Lama's autobiography was there. So was Anne Ambleside's.

'Come in here, Mia darling,' said Fillette, leading her to the en-suite bathroom. 'Let's see about those trousers.' Mia stripped off the chinos and ran water over them.

'You see,' said Fillette conspiratorially, handing her a bar of soap. 'I told you.'

'You told me?'

'They all love it!'

'Oh,' said Mia. 'Do you think so?'

'Really, Mia, weren't you listening? Well, I'll go and find you something to wear.' Mia rubbed at the pants while Fillette went to look for a substitute. She wrung them out, and, after a moment's deliberation, hung them up on the towel rack. Re-entering the bedroom, she saw that Fillette had disappeared into a walk-in closet. On the inside of the open door there hung a near life-size blow-up of a photo depicting Fillette, a little younger, her arms and body entwined in the gluttonous coils of a large snake. It was hard to decide whether she was holding the snake, or the snake holding her. Mia went closer to look at it. It reminded her of Collier's *Lillith*. The name of an esteemed perfume house was emblazoned across the bottom.

'This is that photo shoot you told me about,' she said when Fillette re-emerged with a pile of skirts over one arm.

'That's right,' said Fillette.

'Did it really wrap itself around you like that, or is that bit Photoshopped?'

'Oh, no, it's real. The only bit they did airbrush was the seam of my knickers. That was all I was allowed to wear. Can you imagine? The handler assured me that the snake was just, you know, getting a grip, not trying to do me in. But I was nervous all the same, believe me. Those scales right up against my... ugh.' She affected a shiver.

Fillette's two-dimensional mouth, painted deep red, had a luxurious patrician set to it, almost a sneer, but intermingled with a petulance befitting of her name. *Off with his head!* She looked anything but nervous. 'You hide it well,' she said.

Fillette smiled. 'I think my trousers will be too long for you,' she said. 'But see how you like these skirts.'

Mia began going through the skirts, and found to her surprise that a few of them were indeed in her size. She tried to imagine Fillette's tall frame with a waist as small as her own, and came up with an intriguing mental picture of a spindly Spielbergesque alien creature topped with Fillette's dark locks.

'I was thinking of putting it right here,' said Fillette. Mia turned to see Fillette stroking the wall above the headboard of her bed.

'The painting?' said Mia.

'Yes, nana, the painting,' said Fillette.

'I'm sure Victor will love that,' said Mia, and then wished she hadn't.

'A ha ha! Yes.' She touched the cuff bracelet on her arm as she spoke, turning it, as if it irked her. 'Well, I'll leave you to get changed,' she said.

'Fillette,' said Mia.

Fillette turned in the doorway.

'Can I borrow this?' Mia held up Anne Ambleside's book..

'Of course you may,' said Fillette.'

Having settled on a grey DKNY pencil skirt, Mia returned to the dining-room, where she was relieved to find that the conversation had moved on to other topics. The main course – a seafood risotto – passed without incident (barring a moment when Cordoba asked Mia a question just after she had taken a large mouthful, and the entire table waited silently while she chewed. ) Throughout the meal, she caught Sebastian throwing looks of near-medical fascination at Victor whenever his attention was elsewhere, so that to Mia the two heads appeared to be connected by invisible clockwork. Victor looked away, Sebastian looked at him, Victor looked in Sebastian's direction, Sebastian looked away. Presumably they must have known each other too, when Sebastian was a child. Her mind readily threw together an image of a well-groomed and incorrigible rotter with rose gold hair, but she had trouble regressing Victor in the same way.

At Fillette's suggestion, the guests spread the party about again for their dessert. Mia busied herself by offering to help Fillette serve coffee. It would be a shame, after all, if she were to spill something on that dress.

Someone put Nina Simone in the CD player. Entering the living-room, Mia saw Matt conversing with not one, but two, female skyscrapers, their hipbones jutting out irresponsibly towards his vulnerable parts.

You all right? He mouthed towards her.

She mimed going out for a cigarette. He nodded.

Mia slipped out onto the balcony. She was somehow not at all surprised to find that Sebastian had got there first, and only faintly surprised to find that what he was smoking was not tobacco.

'Evening,' he said. 'Nice skirt.'

'Thanks.'

'You want?' He offered her the spliff.

'No thanks,' she mumbled, speaking with a cigarette filter clenched between her lips, struggling with her lighter in the breeze. A flame from Sebastian's own appeared in front of her chin.

'Aren't you going to thank me?' said Sebastian by its light.

Mia hissed her breath in, her mouth stinging. The cigarette had adhered to her lip in the cold air as she tried to light it, and when she withdrew it to exhale a strip of epithelium had gone along.

Sebastian smiled, his eyes gambolling. Mia gave him an odd look, kneading the torn place in her mouth with her tongue. 'Thank you, Sebastian,' she said.

'Not for the light. For spilling my drink in your lap.'

'You have some very funny ideas.'

'I did do it on purpose, you know,' he said. 'To get you out of that awful situation.'

Mia gave him another odd look, although she was beginning to suspect that odd looks didn't have any effect on him. 'There's nothing awful about people telling you how nice your painting is,' she said.

'I think it's a *wonderful* painting,' said Sebastian.

Mia winced inwardly. He was right, it was awful.

Sebastian smiled blithely and took a toke.

'Okay,' Mia relented. She didn't think it was entirely fair that she had been outmanoeuvred by a compliment and a smile, but there it was. 'It was a weird situation.'

'They're weird people,' said Sebastian.

'And those other people are even weirder,' said Mia, giving voice to the incongruity that had been gnawing at her all evening. 'But they're at the opposite end of the weird spectrum.'

'Which other people?'

'The 'book club.' How does your sister manage to fit in with both?'

'Aha,' said Sebastian. 'That was Hippie Fillette you saw last week. This is Gucci Fillette. There's two of them, you see. Maybe more.' He tossed his hair out of his face. He wore it Liam Gallagher length, and it was straight and floppy, so he was obliged to do this fairly often. 'But from what I understand,' he said, 'you've become more amenable to the 'book clubs' of this world yourself of late.'

'What do you understand, then?'

'My sister tells me you've gone keen on prognostication. Tarot.'

'Oh,' said Mia. 'That's more of an art project.' She was immediately annoyed with herself for feeling the need to justify it. 'But yes,' she qualified, 'I'm open to the idea.'

'Which idea, exactly?'

'That there might be ways of accessing a resource of knowledge that could allow us to...' she tried to remember Melanie's term for it. '... Remember forward instead of backward. That we might have memories of the future.'

'"Memories of the future." Wasn't that a Jewel album?'

'Well I won't bother to tell you what I think if you're going to be like that.'

'You want to know your future?' He took another toke. 'I'll tell you your future,' he croaked windlessly. His eyes, although rapidly turning a delicate antique rose colour around his aquamarine irises, were still dancing merrily.

'So you can predict the future, now?' said Mia.

'Not at all. Not *the* future. Just yours.'

'And why, pray tell, are you able to see just my future?'

'I can't see it. I can predict it.'

'Okay, why can you predict it, then.'

'Because I have an almost limitless base of empirical data to draw on.'

'I have a horrible feeling you're about to explain what you mean by that,' said Mia.

'Well I won't then,' said Sebastian

'Why not?'

'Just to prove that your 'horrible feelings' and your 'memories of the future' are a load of bollocks, same as all the other fatuous claptrap upheld by that crowd my sister fraternises with.' He laughed.

'My sister fraternises with,' he repeated to himself whimsically.

'Do I get to hear what my future holds, at least?'

'Surely. Your future holds great suffering.'

'Right. Thank you. I should have guessed. Any particular sort of suffering?'

'No, nothing in particular. I'm afraid my theory doesn't allow me to postulate anything that specific. It won't even necessarily be you that suffers. It might be someone close to you. Although...' He giggled.

'Although in your case I rather think it will be both.' The joint was dying. Sebastian muttered a peaceable oath and took a flame to it.

'I see,' said Mia. Suddenly she felt fatigued, and defeated, and sick of having her every insecurity tenderly nurtured by battalions of lacquered strangers. She had had her exposure, and now she wanted to find Matt and go home. She stubbed out her half-smoked cigarette, and turned to go inside.

'Before you go in,' said Sebastian. 'I have a question.'

'Yes?'

He inclined his head lazily towards the dining room. 'Why are you with Mr. Corporate-Cipher-Short-Back-and-Sides in there anyway?'

'His name is Matthew. Why shouldn't I be?'

'For the same reason that I know your future holds suffering. Because you're an artist.'

'So what if I'm an artist?'

'He's an accountant.'

She marshalled her resources. 'He's *going* to be an *actuary*.'

'Whatever. Matthew is bland. Blandness and mediocrity, anything neutral, is like poison gas to an artist. Sand on the Promethean fire.'

'How do you know he's bland? You've hardly exchanged two words with him.'

'I did,' said Sebastian. 'We talked about...' he laughed. 'We talked about... *light fixtures*.' Sebastian seemed to find this very amusing, and Mia had to give him a moment or two to compose himself.

'You need to get to know him,' she said limply.

'No,' said Sebastian. 'No, I don't need to get to know him. I know the type.' He changed tack with a swift exhalation. 'Come on. You must know you're out of his league.'

Out Of His League. Mia repeated to herself. The notion was foreign to her. She had never thought of herself as being in a league to start with, let alone out of anyone else's. 'What type should I be with?' she said. 'Your type?' She knew it came across as a rhetorical question, and was glad of it, but she had genuinely had pause for thought. In truth, he would have been precisely her type, a few years ago. Even a year ago. Sebastian would have slotted into the series of layabouts and troublemakers she had hooked up with at Stellenbosch like a joker slots into a deck of cards. He was the same, only more so.

Then she remembered what she found so off-putting about the layabouts and troublemakers of this world. 'I'm with Matt because he's gentle, and lovely, and kind,' she said, by way of wrapping things up. 'And he doesn't go around trying to annoy people into liking him.' Once again, she turned to go inside. 'I'm getting chilly,' she said.

'One more question,' said Sebastian.

'No. Not if it's like the last one.'

'It's nothing like the last one.'

Mia pressed the inside corners of her eyes. It wasn't just for show; she had had a long day and a lot of wine on a stomach lined only with nouvelle cuisine. 'Okay. One more question.'

'Do you want to shag my sister?'

'What?'

'My sister,' said Sebastian, a little more loudly. 'Do you want to shag her.'

Her mouth was hanging open, but Sebastian only shrugged. 'Just wondering,' he said. 'That painting of yours, it's awfully... ardent, isn't it? One can tell you really *meant* those tits.'

If Sebastian had been trying to shock her, he had succeeded. Nobody she knew talked about their sister that way. So much for the famed British reserve. 'No, I do not want to... *shag*... Fillette,' said Mia. 'Why, do you?'

At last she had him off balance. She saw his brow furrowing, drawing the muscles together to shield the Anja Chakra, the Third Eye, while his conventional first and second eyes struggled to come to rest at the right distance from her face. She shrugged, mimicking him. 'Just wondering,' she said. 'See you inside.'

'Wait,' said Sebastian, recovering at the last moment.

Mia faced him once more, folding her arms. 'What is it?'

'I'm ready to tell you my theory now.'

'I'm not sure I can bear your theory right this minute.'

'It's a very good theory.'

She blew out through her nose, wishing that this action would release dragonish jets of flaming smoke rather than two innocuous wisps of carbon dioxide. But she stayed where she was.

Sebastian cleared his throat and gazed heavenward for a moment as if gathering his thoughts. 'It's common knowledge,' he began, 'right...' he stopped.

'Yes?' said Mia. 'Right?'

'Right. It's common knowledge, right, that many great and revered artists – in all art forms, mind – endured some sort of terrible suffering in their lifetimes, right? Diseases, addictions, suicidal tendencies and the like.'

'If the sum of your theory is the 'miserable artist' stereotype, then it's not yours at all,' said Mia. 'Countless people have argued that one needs to suffer to make great art. The idea is not as fashionable as it once was, I'm afraid, Sebastian. You're behind the times.'

'I wasn't finished.'

'Fine.' She motioned for him to continue.

'The crux of my theory,' said Sebastian, 'is that what appears to be the egg is actually the chicken. It's not the suffering that makes the artist. It's the artist that makes the suffering.'

'So they bring it upon themselves, is what you're saying.'

'Not necessarily.' He wagged his lighter in the air. 'Not necessarily themselves. That only happens when, for one reason or another, the system fails.'

'What system?'

'Let me start at the beginning, rather.'

'Right,' said Mia.

'Right.' He stopped again. 'Give me a minute,' he said. 'I need to sit down.'

Mia was worried about Matt. He could be a gory mess of hip-bone lacerations by now. Those girls had looked like they could do some nasty work with their clavicles, too.

Sebastian sat down. 'Oh man,' he said. 'I love this song.'

'I want to go inside now, Seb.'

'Wait. Okay. You know of the law of conservation of energy, right?'

'Um.' She was sure she did know. It was somewhere in there underneath four years of art history. After a moment's worth of kicking long-dormant synapses in the ribs, it came back to her. 'Energy can neither be created nor destroyed, or something,' she said.

'Huh?' said Sebastian.

'The law of conservation of energy,' said Mia.

'Yes! Exactly. Just what I was going to say myself.'

'You did,' said Mia. 'Say it.'

'Right. I did. So what do we mean when we say someone is 'creative'? From what is that creative energy *created*? It can't be, right? Nothing comes from nothing, in the immortal words of Maria von Trapp. It has to be taken from somewhere else. The forces need to be balanced. My answer is that great art is not created, it's *converted*.'

'Converted,' said Mia.

'Yep.'

'From suffering.'

'Yep.'

'That's the stupidest thing I ever heard.'

'I'm telling you,' said Sebastian. 'You lot synthesise art from suffering the way other people synthesise flesh and blood from air and water and food. Look at the evidence.' He swept an arm towards the river as if the evidence might be turned up by trawling its silty depths. 'We have these artists, right, whole generations of them, agonising and moping and cutting off their ears and so on. But!' He held his lighter up, igniting it. 'Then we have another bunch – your Picassos; your Dalis – who are generally quite jolly, flamboyant characters, but everything goes to shit *around* them, because they're selfish, or tempestuous, or just plain wankers.'

'Dali was not a wanker,' said Mia.

'For instance,' Sebastian continued, undaunted, 'look at how many painters, writers, and poets were incorrigible philanderers. It's usually attributed to their untameable passion. But I don't think it's passion, or even lust, that drives them. It's the end result they crave. The collapse of the life they've built around them. The rage of the wife, the despair of the broken families, the wrath of the jilted lovers.'

'That's a bit much. You're making them sound like sadists.'

'No, they're not sadists, and they're not evil, they just know, intuitively, that they need this energy source to produce art. It may be directed inward or outward, but it won't be denied. It's a compulsion.'

'I don't believe I've ever experienced such a compulsion,' said Mia.

'You're from South Africa,' said Sebastian.

Mia was beginning to get sick of his habit of leaving statements like that hanging, as if they were self-explanatory, when he was clearly dying to be asked what he meant. 'And why...' she said, taking a breath, 'should it matter if I'm from South Africa?'

Sebastian grinned. 'Because South Africa has seen so much suffering already.' He delivered this last with a facial flourish, as if he had just whipped the sheet off a masterpiece himself. 'Sometimes, you see, the artist doesn't take an active role at all,' he continued, visibly warming to his task. 'Sometimes there's so much suffering on hand that they don't need to. Just look at what happens in the art world after a war. The Great War, the Second World War, Vietnam. A veritable evolutionary leap, an explosion of creativity, in music, in writing, in art, every time. War can fuel an artistic community for years on end. They thrive on the stuff. And in South Africa's case... why, apartheid alone could last you for decades.'

It had, thought Mia. She had to give him that. Aphaat-hite, as he called it, had given rise to resistance art; surely the best the country had ever produced. And since there had been nothing left to resist... well, who could deny that there had been something of a lull in truly powerful work? It was pure twaddle, of course, Sebastian's theory, but for a troubling few seconds Mia lost sight of why that was. 'Wait...' she said. 'Reacting to chaos and destruction is not the same thing as thriving on it.' There it was. Common sense. She knew she had left some somewhere. 'Of course an event as momentous as apartheid is going to produce a similarly momentous reaction from artists. That's what they're there for: to reflect. Like Andy Warhol said; an artist is a mirror.'

'Andy Warhol said that an artist is a mirror because Andy Warhol was not a great artist. Consider his oeuvre. Endless replication. Like a parrot.'

'But that's the *point* of his art.'

'It's not a very good point.'

'You just have an answer for everything, don't you.'

'I also have a question,' said Sebastian. 'Do you really think art would be worth the canvas it was painted on if all it had to *react* to was rainbows and ponies and long walks on the beach? Peace in our time?'



'There is, actually, such a thing as celebratory art, you know.'

'Yes, and it's all godawful. But you've missed my point. The finished artwork doesn't necessarily portray the destructive forces that were converted to produce it.'

Mia balked visibly at his choice of verb.

'It might be a landscape or a bowl of fruit, or a poem about birds,' Sebastian went on, 'but if it's really great, you're guaranteed to find a proportional amount of suffering around the creator to account for it. Unless, as I said, the system derails, as it does with such regularity that it seems the norm. If other drives – social conditioning, say, or the fear of retribution – prevent artists from causing suffering, then the conversion process has to take place entirely within. They self-destruct. Madness, blindness, deafness, syphilis. Nothing is too great a sacrifice. Someone with a truly voracious artistic drive will bow to that need beyond all other concerns, including their health.'

'Deafness?' said Mia. 'Syphilis? Easy there a minute. Mental disorders, maybe, okay. In some movements insanity was considered an asset. But you can't seriously be pretending you believe that artists inflict *diseases* on themselves on purpose.'

'Unconsciously, they do.'

'And you think your sister's a flake! Tell me, Sebastian, what about Frida Kahlo? She made the bus crash, did she?'

'Who did what?'

'Frida Kahlo, the Mexican artist. She was in an accident that left her in chronic pain. Are you suggesting she somehow chose that fate?'

'Oh yes, I remember. Salma Hayek movie, yeh? Her husband was also an artist, wasn't he?'

'Diego Rivera.'

'And a serial adulterer, if I recall correctly?' He smiled and leaned back against the balustrade as if he had scored a victory. 'Artistic couples are my favourite examples. They feed on the pain they cause each other. Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath. Kurt Cobain and Courtney Love. Two birds killed with one stone.'

'Courtney Love?'

'Okay. Maybe not Courtney Love. Bad example.'

'Well,' said Mia. 'I suppose I should at least be flattered that you consider me a great artist.'

'Not yet,' said Sebastian. 'But one day.' He did not smile as he said it, nor wink, nor twinkle, there was in his voice no whiff of mockery or flattery or artifice. And in that moment she forgave him his abrasiveness; just for the unassuming way in which he offered her this kernel of faith, whatever his reasons might be. *Dis nie speelgoed nie*.

'You have great confidence in your own opinion,' she said, smiling.

'It takes one to know one.'

Somewhere in the dark, a penny dropped. 'So that's why I should be with you, then?' said Mia. 'So that we can torture each other into genius?'

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Sebastian affected a shifty-eyed look, his irises traversing the reds of his eyes. 'Oh dear,' he said. 'Perhaps I shouldn't have told you my theory after all.'

She laughed, with less cynicism in her voice than she had intended. 'I'd better set about ruining someone's life as quickly as possible, then. Or my own. Is that about the size of it?' she said.

Sebastian smiled peacefully. 'You could always hope for a war.'

## Full Worm Moon

On the tenth of March, Mia turned twenty-three.

The day had been ordinary; she didn't like to make a fuss. Helena had suggested that she at least have a drinks party, and it was at this point, giving the idea a moment's consideration, that Mia realised she had fallen out of contact with more or less all the tenuous friends she had had in London; those that she knew from South Africa, at least. There was Melanie. There was Fillette. There was Matt. She saw more of Helena's friends than she did her own.

'It's the old story,' said Helena. 'But this would be a good excuse to get in touch again.'

'I think I'll just have a quiet one,' said Mia.

Mia arrived at Matt's that evening to find that the place had been garrisoned by Davy's footy mates, whom she thought of collectively as Gaz. They were gelled and pug-faced and harmless enough. She did not mind them, except when they looked at her. Neither tenant was home: Matt was still at work, and Davy, Gaz reported, had gone on a beer run. Shamille was the only girl there besides herself, but there were reports that reinforcements would arrive later.

'Who's playing?' asked Mia for the sake of politeness, looking in vain for somewhere to sit down.

'No one. It's eviction night,' said Gaz.

'Oh, good grief,' said Mia. She retired to Matt's room, feeling unfeted and exhausted.

Her work schedule had been fairly light that day: two Swedish massages, a seaweed wrap, and another bout of wrestling with the spine of Mr. Stephens, whose back pain was such a constant companion that he had named it 'Joe.'

The afternoon had passed pleasantly enough until the latter arrived for his appointment. Mia had been working on his neck when there had suddenly been a crunching noise, and her client let forth a ragged torrent of oaths loud enough to flush Fillette from her office.

'What did you do to Mr. Stephens?' said Fillette. Mr. Stephens owned a refinery.

'I'm not sure,' said Mia.

'O Great God on High, o bountiful Mother Mary,' said Mr. Stephens.

'I think it may be a pinched nerve,' said Mia.

Chantal Flick put her head in the door. 'What on earth?' she said.

'We're fine,' said Mia.

'Sweet living Saviour, ease my torment,' said Mr. Stephens.

'Let me help,' said Chantal Flick.

'Should we call a doctor?' said Fillette.

'He'll be fine in a minute,' said Mia.

'I can help,' said Chantal.

'Let her help, for the love of Cliff Richard,' said Mr. Stephens.

Chantal Flick helped. To Mia's lasting astonishment, irritation, and relief, the ineffectual-looking gestures she performed near and on Mr. Stephens's neck over the next twenty minutes caused the volume and colourfulness of his protest to abate steadily.

As soon as he was able, he had beat a hasty retreat. As soon as she was able, so had Mia.

To calm her frayed nerves, Mia decided to cloister herself in Matt's room and continue working on her study for the Hanged Man card until Matt arrived.

She had begun painting the deck on canvas, and was pleased with her work thus far, although if she continued the way she had started, it seemed Melanie might be proven right in having said Mia was underestimating the task she had set for herself. The Fool alone had taken her the better part of a month. With the studies she had fared better; she worked on them on the tube and sometimes even in her lunch break, and was already almost halfway through the trumps.

When Matt arrived, she was pleased to see a beribboned box under his arm.

'Ah,' he said, when he found her in his room. 'So you are here. Happy birthday.'

'Thank you,' said Mia, closing her sketchpad.

'Sorry you had to put up with that lot by yourself,' said Matt, swinging his head towards the living-room.'

'They haven't been too unbearable.' She looked at the box. 'Is that for me?'

Helena, she knew, was going to give her a *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* DVD Box Set, but they were waiting for that to arrive in the post from Amazon, so this was her first present today. He put it in front of her where she sat cross-legged on his bed, and kissed her neck, breathing in. 'Mmm,' he said. He took her hands and smelled those too. 'Seaweed.'

'And?'

'Frangipani.'

'That's an easy one.' He knew it was the house default.

'And wintergreen, which can only mean Joe.'

'Very good.' She didn't feel like telling him how much trouble Joe had caused her that day.

Matt was kneading her shoulders himself now, something he was not bad at, but generally paranoid about getting 'wrong.' He nodded to the box. 'Are you going to open it?'

Unwrapping the parcel, Mia discovered a digital camera.

'Oh!' she said. 'I thought you were going to get me an i-Pod.'

'Would you have preferred that?'

'No, no! Sorry, I didn't mean that. This is wonderful.'

'I know nothing can replace a good manual camera for an artist, but I thought you would enjoy this, for, you know. Taking pictures.'

'I will. Thank you.'

Later they joined the party to watch the eviction ceremony. (When in Rome, said Matt.) Mia sat cross-legged on the upholstered chair, only a small slice of the flatscreen TV within her view. Gaz and Gaz and Gaz and Davy sat hunched over their knees with their hands knotted on or near their mouths, on tenterhooks. For her part, Mia couldn't care less. She was feeling both lethargic and restless, and bothered by a sensation which she at first took to be an incipient headache. At last she realised that the annoying sensation was the pressure building in her own head as she drew the inverted figure of the Hanged Man, suspended from a tree by his ankle. She huffed laughter to herself and turned the sketchpad upside down, rendering the card Ill-Dignified and the figure himself gravity-defying.

'Are you drawing me?' said Matt sleepily.

Mia looked up at Matt and saw the Big Brother contestants miniaturised and translucent in the lenses of his glasses. 'You?' she said. 'No.'

'It's just that you keep looking this way.'

'Do I? Sorry.'

'I don't mind.'

She was sitting with the tarot book open on one knee and her sketchpad on the other. 'Who's that poor sod?' said Gaz, walking past behind her chair with a fresh beer, and looking over her shoulder at the double-page spread of information in the book.

He was Odin, he was the Christ, he was Stasis and the Reckoning. He was a covenant fulfilled. 'The Hanged Man,' said Mia, indicating the double page spread of information about him in the tarot book, open on her knee.

The Rider-Waite Hanged Man looked commendably philosophical about his fate, and she had tried to imitate his expression, but this way up, floating like a helium balloon at the end of his rope, with his legs in their figure 4 now more reminiscent of a pirouette, her own version looked strangely jaded, and forlorn, like one long-accustomed to being made fun of and treated without care.

'Gaauugh, that slut,' said Gaz, as the evictee was announced. 'she deserves it.'

'Look at her, she's already well mackerelered,' said Gaz.

They were getting well mackerelered themselves. Mia yawned and looked across at Matt again. His eyes behind his glasses were closed now, his breaths going delta. Mia went through to the bathroom to brush her teeth. She was also tired.

When she returned, and picked up her sketchpad from the couch where she had left it, her mouth fell open. On her Hanged Man's face there was now a bristling handlebar moustache.

'Who did this?' she said to the room at large. Matt started awake. Out on the balcony, Davy snickered.

Mia dropped the sketchpad in Matt's lap, ducked through the sash window, and without preamble, she punched Davy in the midsection, left-right jab to the solar plexus, left hook to the floating rib. She was an untrained but intuitive fighter, and the first two blows half-winded him. He laughed, delighted by the fact that she had half-winded him, and said, Mimi, all this time, and I never noticed you were a southpaw. He called her a bolshy little ladette, picked her up by placing one arm between her legs and the other under her arm, and hung her over the balustrade.

'Now who's a hanged man, eh?'

Mia screamed, but was too terrified to struggle. She felt her breasts slipping free of her bra. Her field of vision did a washing machine effect, revealing the black sky, then the street below, then Shamille inside, laughing cruelly out of jealousy. Even in her panic Mia felt sorry for her. Then she noticed Matt. He was not laughing, but neither was he leaping to her defence.

'Why didn't you help me?' she said to him later, alone in his room.

'I knew he wouldn't hurt you,' said Matt. 'Why is it such a problem?'

Mia had no idea how to answer. It was Matt's own business when he didn't stand up for himself. Until now, she had not suspected that he might fail to stand up for her, too. She couldn't say that though, so she made the argument about Davy.

'I know you can afford to live by yourself. Why do you put up with him?'

'My parents need that money, Mia. You know that.' His voice was becoming softer in inverse proportion to the loudness of hers.

'What about what I need?' It was something to say. 'What if I don't want to share you with him anymore?'

'Share me?' said Matt with genuine confusion.

'Share our space, then.'

'Are you saying you want to move in with me?'

'And if I am?'

'Well, would you like to?'

'Well, are you offering?' She was still almost shouting, but smiling at the same time.

'Let's say I am.' And at last she was moved to calm, when she saw the way his toes were squirming nervously in the act of asking.

'Then let's say I do,' said Mia.

It might, after all, be a solution.

It was, at any rate, progress.

At the very least, it would be a change.

Before going to bed that evening, Mia went through to the living-room to clean up after Davy's mates, and decided to check her mail on his computer.

There was one from Sonya, saying happy birthday, one from Katrina and her mother, saying happy birthday, and one from Cassie, saying happy birthday, and by the way she was not coming back to London after all; she had taken a job at a bar in Edinburgh and if Mr. Twycross ever phoned would Mia kindly tell him to take a good running jump for himself.

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On the vernal equinox, Cassie cut her hair and bought a new pair of jeans with three rows of overlapping pockets on the seat, which, according to Justin, made her look like a filing cabinet.

He, like everyone else in the pub, was staring at the screen mounted above the bar with his mouth half-open. They came alone, mostly, the afternoon drinkers. The only noise in the joint was coming from the corner booth, and for the moment, even that conversation was centring on the events broadcast on high. On the screen, a woman was covering a man's back with hot wax.

'I don't know, Justin, I just don't think it's wise to put all your eggs in one basket that way,' said Cassie.

'How is it putting all my eggs in one basket any more than reading Commerce was putting all my eggs in one basket?' said Justin, still staring at the screen. 'A basket much less likely to make me happy in the long run?'

'Because the Commerce basket is a more reliable basket than the music basket,' said Cassie.

'But I hate the Commerce basket!'

'Why don't you finish the degree, *then* give the guitar thing your best shot?'

'Because that's not what Brian Boitano would do,' said Justin.

Cassie laughed, accustomed, by now, to dealing with the perpetual motion machine of fuzzy logic, humour and wishful thinking which served Justin for a train of thought. She found his imagination enviable, his frame of reference unfathomable, and his lack of direction almost as vexing as her father did. 'I'd just hate to see it all go to waste,' she said.

They were both on bar duty today. The place was empty except for a handful of solo practitioners, Susannah, her band, their manager, and various accessories, who were installed in the corner booth, as they often were now that they were Edinburgh-based again.

Justin was ignoring them. Before they arrived he had been playing pinball with a cross-eyed intensity that intrigued Cassie; he looked so like a predator locked onto a small prey animal in a confined space. But now it was all studied indifference (on his part) and laughing too loud (on Susannah's.) He had not managed to keep the ball in play for more than three minutes at a stretch since, and finally he retired to the relative shelter of the bar. Cassie had no idea and not much interest in what might have caused a relapse to enmity between them. She guessed it had something to do with music, if only because her arrival had provoked a second post-mortem of the words that had been passed over Sunday lunch in Cramond the day before.

'It all?' said Justin. 'What all?'

'I think you have a lot to offer. Really.' She knew she was being vague; but for all that she was entirely sincere.

'Oh God,' said Justin. 'Don't tell me you see my potential.'

Cassie laughed plosively. 'I do,' she admitted. 'I do.'



'Potential for what, though?' he sulked.

'I don't *kno-ho-how*,' said Cassie, still laughing. It was no nameable talent or faculty, though it was true he played guitar well, it certainly wasn't *that*. Potential! He was a coruscating pillar of the stuff, in the raw, he was enriched uranium, he was Niagara, they should use him to power turbines.

'You are like your father,' he said. 'The Harris bloodline has a sixth sense about my potential.'

To begin with, the argument with her father had been about Cassie's inexplicable new incarnation as a barlady. Alexander Harris had not expressed much more than incredulity when she first announced the appointment, but in the interim he had clearly given it some thought. The previous day at lunch, he had asked her, as if it was still a given, when she would be going back to London to find work there.

'I'm not sure I want to go back anymore,' she had said.

'Well, hadn't you better look for something a little more serious around here, then?'

'Serious?'

'You're not really doing much to improve your CV, working in a bar.'

Cassie did not want to improve her CV any more than she wanted to go back to London. She did not, particularly, want to become a barlady either, but she had to start doing something with the remaining time on her visa, and Justin's suggestion was the best she had heard yet.

'Well, if you really want to fritter your time away serving whisky, there's not much I can do about it,' said Alexander Harris.

These comments had been directed as much at Justin as at her. In fact, as Cassie had gradually gleaned from subsequent comments and Justin's recent input, they had possibly not been intended for her at all. Justin's take on the matter seemed to be that her father was merely using the fact that he, Justin, had now dragged Cassie into his dead-end pursuits as a new approach path, a re-entry point, to the perennially moot topic of his step-son's inadequate concern for his future.

'He loves to guilt-trip,' Justin had said immediately afterwards, as he drove them, fuming, to Quigley's.

'Ja,' Cassie had responded feelingly. She rolled her eyes. She had no idea what he was talking about.

'I sometimes want to shove him around,' he had told her.

'What?'

'Not hit him, not at all, not hurt him, just shove him a bit, knock him off balance, like we used to do to the nerdy kids at school.'

'You used to shove around the nerdy kids at school?'

Justin shrugged. His face and bearing, for the first time since they had seen each other again, reminiscent of the face and bearing of the boy who had sat across from her at Christmas dinner in Cape Town five years ago, glowering. 'Just to get them to react. Maybe make them cry.'

'You want to make my father cry?'

'I want to knock him off balance.'

It was not immediately obvious to an outsider. Alexander had long ago reduced his criticisms of his step-son's flagrant laxity of purpose to a shorthand of innuendos, sideswipes and loaded glances in which both were fluent, and which could pass unremarked by the uninitiated in all but the most heated of confrontations.

'What else has he said to you?' she said to Justin now.

'He says that if he had had my talents and my opportunities in life he wouldn't have squandered them like I'm doing.'

'What talents was he talking about?'

'Oh, thanks.'

'I meant, specifically!'

Justin shrugged, but it was a shrug with a story to it.

'Tell me,' said Cassie.

'I suppose I was pretty good at maths.'

'Why the past tense?'

'Because all my results are in the past tense. I did sort of very well in my A levels. In maths.' He sounded embarrassed, and she wondered if he might conceivably belong to that brotherhood that saw mediocrity as a virtue unto itself. Surely not.

'Oooaaauhgh,' went everyone in the bar except Cassie. She looked at the TV. The Big Brother contestant had just pulled the first wax strip from her housemate's back. Cassie considered reminding Justin that he had given up Big Brother for Lent.

'So why did you drop out of applied maths?' said Cassie. This, she had learned, was the ineradicable black mark that lay, if not at the heart, then at least at the beginning, of the conflict.

It had also dawned on her, during the course of a long and amusing evening's reminiscing about what they had thought of each other across all the years of their acquaintance, that this was why Justin had been such a misery on his last visit to South Africa, five years ago. It had been right at the onset of his fall from grace.

'Various reasons,' said Justin, still staring at the TV. He winced as another wax strip came off.

Susannah was beckoning him from the corner booth. 'Waiter!' she called. 'Oh, waiter! We would like another round.'

Justin blew through his lips. 'I'm an assistant manager, Susannah,' he said.

'Of course you are, dear.'

'I'll go,' said Cassie, smiling.

She had never intended to take the bar job, but it had seemed to happen of its own accord. Justin had phoned her up in Cramond one afternoon to say that he had put in a good word for her with the manager, and that she had better show up sooner rather than later if she wanted to take advantage of it.

'If I'm terrible at it, will you get fired?' Cassie had asked.

'No, no, don't worry, *you'll* get fired,' said Justin.

Cassie had trained for three weeks, and was now in her second week of full duty. As of next Monday she would be entrusted with cash-up and lock-up responsibilities too. Justin had been right. It was politics, psychology, sociology, crowd management, performance art, and occasionally self-defence, but it was not rocket science.

*This is what comes of studying philosophy*, Mia had emailed.

The early shifts, when they were both on at the same time, were the best: they didn't earn much by way of tips, but they talked, and played pool, and devised shooters, and she was never alone. The only word she wrote all day was the *Thanks!* She scribbled with a flourish on bills.

After work, often as not, she would go back to Marchmont, ostensibly because Justin had a computer, which she would ostensibly use to write words other than '*Thanks!*'.

The first day that she had arrived there for this purpose, she had rung the doorbell two or three times and received no response. Luckily one of the other tenants made an exit just then, and she caught the door behind him, trying to look innocuous.

She went up the stairs to number six and knocked on the door. Once again there was no response, although she could quite clearly hear movement inside, and voices, or a voice, that might have been his. He was shouting. Trying the door and finding it unlocked, she had entered, to see lengths of cable snaking into the living room from under Justin's door. Justin could be heard in the living room, not shouting, she realised, but singing. It was an odd kind of singing; long, silences followed by brief, powerful bursts that ended as abruptly as they began.

'.....nah nah nah TAKE it.....nah nah nah BREAK it.....yoooooooo  
don't.....'

She leaned forward to put her ear to the door, but at that moment it opened, and Rex appeared. He gave a hoarse shout of surprise to find himself face to face with her. She returned it. Rex clutched his heart and sagged.

'Is -' said Cassie.

Rex put a finger to his lips, and slipped into the corridor with her. He was wearing a cardigan and a sarong left behind by one of the Kiwis. 'We're recording,' he said after he had closed the door softly behind him. 'Actually we might as well go in and tell him to start again, he won't have heard that.' He turned towards the door, then back to her with sudden interest. 'You don't sing at all, do you?'

'No,' she said as emphatically as she could.

'Pity.' The interest went out of his eyes like a snuffed candle.

The living room she had helped Justin clean and arrange two weeks before had been in chaos again, forested with amps, microphone stands, coils of cable, multiplugs, various guitars. Massive sheets of white foam had been rolled out and tacked up over every vertical surface.

Justin was sitting at the computer with headphones on, keeping time with his chin.

'.....nah nah nah -'

Rex caught Justin's attention by waving both arms about in his peripheral vision. He made a slicing motion across his throat. Justin pressed a button and pushed the headphones down to his neck. 'Bum take,' said Rex. 'Sorry. I screamed. Your sister's here, by the way.'

'I can see that. Hello you.'

'Hey. Sorry about your take.'

'You're all right,' said Justin. 'I would probably have done it again anyway.' He looked at the screen, back at her. 'You don't sing at all, do you?'

'Rex already asked me. I don't.'

'Pity,' he started tapping at the keyboard, then unplugged the earphones and played back what he had just recorded. His voice emanated from the speakers in harmony with itself. Cassie glanced towards the computer. 'So... you're busy with that then?'

'Oh, no, this is Rex's machine, you'll be using mine. My room.'

The flashdrive which held Cassie's thesis was in her bag. Instead of going into Justin's room, taking the flashdrive out of her bag and putting it in Justin's computer, she sat down on the couch in the living room and kicked a block of foam rubber.

'Why are there so many eggs in here, mate?' called a voice from the kitchen.

'We thought we needed the cartons,' Rex called back.

'You thought we needed the cartons,' said Justin. 'Sound-proofing myth,' he explained to Cassie.

'Acoustic *treatment*!' said Rex. 'I never, not once, said anything about sound-proofing.'

'Still a myth,' said Justin. He was staring at the screen and shaking his head slowly from side to side, which Cassie knew to be an indication that he was ruminating on something, very possibly deciding between two equally weighted options. Right right *right*, he said to himself, and, presumably to Rex: 'This is with the cathedral filter.' He pressed play.

'What's that funny smell?' came the voice from the kitchen again.

'It's the rising damp!' called Justin.

'Who's in there?' said Cassie.

Justin leaned his chair out into the hallway and craned his neck, as if it had only now occurred to him to wonder. 'Looks like Terry.'

The recording reached the part where Rex and Cassie's brief mingled whoops of surprise could be heard faintly behind Justin's voice. 'You're a little sharp, Cass,' said Justin, smiling.

'Needs more cow-bell,' called Terry from the kitchen.

The flat, Cassie was to discover in the days ahead, was rarely occupied by only its tenants. Terry was one of the more tenacious of a seemingly endless collection of nomadic acquaintances who were often to be found gazing fondly into the open fridge when she arrived. It was usually a safe assumption that they played bass guitar. There were very few conversations that did not end up with one person at Rex's computer, and a microphone facing an amp. At this point, someone would often open a bottle of something, and within the next forty-five minutes to an hour, a girl would arrive, or two, and it would become a party.

'I should buy ear plugs,' said Cassie, who had, at last, begun a superficial kind of sidelong approach to reacquainting herself with her work.

'Why don't you just buy a computer?' said Justin.

'What's that thing about, anyway?' said Rex, glancing over her shoulder at the screen.

'Goats,' said Cassie.

She became very good at remembering who took what in their coffee, and started to wish she could play an instrument, or at least sing.

'I'll teach you guitar,' said Justin. 'S'easy.'

'Oh no,' said Cassie. 'I have no feeling for music.'

Cassie had assumed that for Justin it was no more than a hobby, and although she had wondered if he was envious of Rex – this scruff ball, this slacker, this sometime sidekick of his, who had been in trouble biweekly during his single year at university and who still dressed as if he was on the dole – doing it as a day-job too, and actually earning a decent shabby-chic living off royalties, she had not suspected, before Sunday's events, that he had been serious when he told her months ago that he still wanted to pursue a career in music himself.

'What does your mother think of this?' said Cassie when she had returned from serving Susannah's table.

'I haven't discussed it with her,' said Justin.

Cassie didn't think it would come to much if he did. In the month they had lived together in Cramond, she had formed her own impressions of Lynn's influence on her son, or lack thereof. If her Justin had no direction, no defined goal, Lynn clearly didn't feel it mattered, any more than it mattered

if the sun didn't have a goal, or if a tiger didn't have direction. Some things – especially only children, especially only sons – are just splendid, and made to burn bright, and to be adored, and to inspire. Her role in arguments such as the one that had taken place at the Harris table that day was generally to smooth things over when they got out of hand. But things never really got out of hand. As far as Cassie understood it, this was, at least for Justin, part of the problem.

Justin was genuinely upset by the mild dispute – the pinball table had suffered for it – but Cassie, although she was trying to express similar feelings, had to admit that in the wake of having locked horns with her father, her most enduring reaction was a strange warm glow in the pit of her stomach.

'Don't worry,' Justin had told her. 'It's actually not about you. It's about me.'

'I think it's about both of us,' Cassie had said, firmly.

The warm glow was particularly associated with the fact that, as her father's tactics had progressed from passive aggression to outright criticism, (in a civilised fashion, never a voice raised, never a point out of order) it had proved itself to involve Justin too; not so much shifting its focus as expanding the blast radius of the issue to encompass him. Here at her father's table were two black sheep, two apples that were refusing to fall from the tree, in cahoots. They had gotten into trouble together.

'What would your father say about it, do you think?' said Cassie

'What do I care?' said Justin.

He had been told enough times that he took after his mother, and he was happy to take after his mother. His father was oafish, and he suspected that he might be oafish, or might end up oafish, when his body filled out and he no longer had elegance of conformation to compensate for his natural ungainliness. It was a worthy expenditure of energy to work hard at being as different from his father as possible, which meant not being oafish, or loud, or volatile, or controlling, or Type A. If it also meant being bad with money, having no head for business, being unambitious, unmaterialistic, impractical, unsuccessful, and harbouring a fanatical apathy towards expensive things which go very fast, then so be it.

The one thing Justin shared with his father which was too deep-seated and also too handy to forsake was an unerring eye for opportunity, and it was this utilitarian organ that served him the night that Rex first voiced his dissatisfaction with the increasingly torrid and deeply matriarchal politics of Vicious Spiral.

Cassie happened to be present the evening that Rex's gripes bubbled to the surface, under what, she later came to suspect, could only have been Justin's careful management. Eavesdropping

unashamedly from Justin's bedroom; she had heard Susannah's name mentioned in less than adulatory tones, and had sauntered into the living room to see if she would be allowed to join the conversation.

Rex didn't stop talking, so she sat down, and thus gathered, by degrees, that Susannah had been putting up a fuss about the Marchmont sessions. She had complained, to begin with, that any good material that Rex produced with Justin would go to waste. Rex had replied that what they were doing wouldn't work for Vicious Spiral's sound anyway, and if he came up with anything that would, he would let them know about it.

'That was when she started going mental,' said Rex. Susannah, he explained, had voiced concerns that Justin would lay claims to any material that could be called a collaborative effort.

Justin laughed humourlessly. 'It didn't occur to her that you and I might be capable of behaving like gentlemen and deciding between ourselves who was responsible for what?'

'That's what I said,' said Rex. I said, "The trouble with you, Susannah," - he began shaking a finger in the space he had allocated to Susannah's imaginary face, which was unfortunately at that moment occupied by Cassie's - "is that you assume everyone else is as fickle and unscrupulous as you are."

'Wow, you said that?', said Justin, genuinely impressed, although more by the news that Rex knew what 'fickle' and 'unscrupulous' meant than by the fact that he had said these words to Susannah's face.

'Then she said, "Well at least now we know which of us here has this band's best interests at heart." And I said,' he paused for effect - 'I wasn't aware you had a heart, Susie.'

'Cut...ting.'

'But accurate, no? The truth is, she's been on a short fuse with me ever since you and I moved in together. I think she's been looking for a chance to jump down my throat. I just didn't know why until now.'

'Was Jack there?'

'No,' said Rex.

'What was Bruce doing while all this was going on?'

'They didn't say anything,' said Rex, taking "Bruce" as a shorthand for "the rest of the band." 'But you could see by the way they were looking at her that they agreed with me.'

'What, even Tanya?' said Justin. Cassie thought he was overdoing it with the facial expressions.

'Aye. You see, the thing is,' - he lowered his voice, unnecessarily - 'she couldn't have chosen a worse time to draw attention to the matter of loyalty.'

'Why not?' said Justin, lowering his voice in turn.

'Because we know she's been talking to EMI.'

'Really?'

Rex nodded darkly.

'Blimey.'

'She can't do anything, though. Not until we've finished the next album.'

'Nobody's said the word yet, have they?'

'No. Not yet,' said Rex.

'Which word?' said Cassie.

Rex glanced none-too-subtly at Cassie.

'You can speak freely in front of her,' said Justin grandly, making Cassie feel like Maid Marion amongst the outlaws in Sherwood Forest.

'Splitting up,' said Rex.

'That's two words,' said Cassie.

'Well,' said Justin. 'If it does come to that, you can always join my band, Rex.'

'Your band?'

'My band.'

'You have a band?'

'Aye.' Cassie caught the shibboleth and wondered if Rex had, or if Justin himself had.

Rex peered behind the curtain, looked down at the cracks between the chair cushions. 'Where?'

'Well it's just me so far.'

'Your band is... you? You're a one-man band? Do you have one of those strap-on drum-kits with the harmonica and everything?'

'I have a pianist in the works.'

'What do we want a pianist for?' said Rex, fiddling with the tuning on his guitar. Cassie noted his use of 'we' and noted that Justin had noted it too.

'Jazz, my son. Jazz.'

'Oh, Christ, Silveira. Move on.' A suspicion formed on his brow and leaked down to his eyes, then his mouth. 'Now just a minute. This pianist you mentioned. You wouldn't happen to be talking about Linkso would you?' said Rex.

Justin smiled. Rex groaned.

'Aw, come on, Rex, it will be great! You know it will.' He had slipped into Edinburgh intonation to go with the Aye. Not the accent, just the intonation. For lubrication.

'What's a Linkso?' said Cassie.

'Cu Sith is dead, Justin. You can't step in the same river twice.'

'Three times, actually, it would be. We broke up in 2001, remember, when you pulled Susannah's...'

'- trousers down,' Rex finished with him, interrupting himself with a simian guffaw. 'God yes, she went her dinger.' He caught the glint in Justin's eye, and realised he was being lured by the hand into nostalgia. The smile disappeared 'I thought he was in London, anyway,' said Rex.

'He's in Durham, now,' said Justin, with a tone of quiet anticipation, as if Linkso, whoever he might be, was even now drawing slowly, inexorably, nearer to Edinburgh.

'What kind of a name is Linkso?' said Cassie.

'Lynx-O,' articulated Justin. 'Lucas. Carmichael.'



'Oh. The man who made you believe in God?' Rex looked between them with some confusion. 'You didn't tell me he played piano.'

'You didn't ask.'

Of the many names, lineups and genres Justin and his pals had mucked around with over the years, Cu Sith had been the most successful, and the band which all of them remembered most fondly. It had succeeded a very short-lived and ill-fated incarnation as a Radiohead tribute band which they had called The Bends. After a few months' musical hiatus from one another, during the first of which at least one Bend had solemnly sworn he would never, ever become musically involved with at least one other Bend again, He, Rex, Susannah and their drummer, Cormac Murray, had put aside their differences and their reservations and reformed. Then Lucas came on board, and the rest, for a while, was history.

Justin was nineteen at the time, at the end of the single year of his first attempt at a degree; and had just got together with Susannah. This combination of factors, Cassie suspected, probably had more than a little to do with the degree coming to an untimely halt.

'So you played jazz?' she asked him later that evening.

'After a fashion.'

'And that's what you'll play now?'

'Probably. But look, let's not put the cart before the horse.'

'I didn't know you liked it,' she said. His music collection had not revealed much of a taste for it.

'It's not my main thing,' said Justin. 'To be honest. Rex is better. But if I want to get Lucas interested, we'll have to at least pretend that's what we're planning on doing.'

'He's a big fan?'

'He's beyond help.'

'Hmm.'

'Are you?' said Justin.

'Sam was.' Cassie shrugged. 'I never really got into it.' She giggled, and then she laughed, spilling her coffee onto the transformer for Rex's wah pedal and forever compromising the sensitivity of the treble settings.

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It was on the twenty-seventh of November, exactly half way through the slow bleed that would at last, kill him dead, that Cassie came into Sam's hospital room and prayed by his bedside.

A fact which now embarrassed her, as the memory of peeing on a bluebottle sting at the beach embarrassed her. She preferred to pretend it had never happened. At least peeing on the bluebottle sting had been effective.

The kind of praying Cassie had done was a very specific kind of praying, which involved making promises in exchange for special treatment. Which, she supposed, wasn't so much prayer as bargaining. She might as well have been making deals with the devil for all she cared who answered her. She might as well have been teaching the alphabet to the ants for all it helped.

*If he wakes up, I'll break up with him. If he wakes up, I'll never see him again. If he wakes up and he's all right, I'll make him go to California.*

The whites of Sam's eyes beneath his lids were flooded a uniform scarlet.

From the fourth day, they had started taking turns at his bedside, she Dianne, and Sam Sr. His parents had insisted that Ben go on with school and all his sports, so it was usually evening time when he came, if he came. He was not at all good at it, sitting by a bed, waiting, and his parents had intuited that he would feel guilty not sitting by the bed unless they insisted. So they insisted. For this reason Ben was nowhere near the mediclinic when Sam went into cardiac arrest, and it was just one of hundreds of decisions that Sam Sr. would come to question himself on when his youngest son said, I should have been there.

*Sammy is sleeping*, they had told his baby cousin, Tamsin.

Nobody knew if this was true.

What Cassie learned in those eleven days was that comas do not lend themselves to fence-sitting.

Dianne Loudon thought that Sam wouldn't have wanted to stay in this world in this state. Wouldn't want. Didn't want. He could not tell them. He was not alive, he was not dead. He's not here anymore, said Dianne.

How do you know? said Cassie.

'Cassie,' said Sam Sr. 'That'll do.'

On the twenty-third of November, Sam's parents had stopped asking Cassie for her opinion. What flowers to put in his room, that they had asked her about. What music to play at his funeral, that they would consult her on later. But when it came to this decision, the decision not to operate a second time, the façade of her involvement was abruptly dropped.

Mia had no doubts. As far as Mia was concerned, what happened after the nineteenth happened to his body alone. The Loudons had not asked for Mia's opinion either, but out of all of them, Mia was the only one who seemed sure what her opinion was.

On that day, the twenty-seventh, Cassie had turned from her divine negotiations to find Mia curled in a chair in the corner of the room, the green eyes calmly on her. Cassie had been in the room for at least ten minutes without noticing her presence, and she jumped out of her chair, wet-cotton panic rolling across her skin.

'I didn't see you there,' said Cassie. It was hard not to feel as if Mia had been spying on her, sitting so quietly there in the corner. She, Cassie, had been speaking in a whisper; she was not sure if she had been heard.

Mia did not stop looking at her. 'He's long gone,' she said at last.

Mia, like all of them, was entitled to her opinion.

'How are you so sure?' said Cassie.

Mia did not answer.

Cassie wasn't willing to take it on faith. But it was not Cassie's decision.

Whether it was Dianne's decision, or God's, or Sam's, or no one's, they would never know.

At six-fourteen on the morning of the thirtieth, he was pronounced medically dead. 'Medically dead' was perhaps not that different from dead in any other way, but at least it was no longer open for discussion.

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*Grief is what happens when we lack an understanding of what is meant by death.*

*The kind of guilt that accompanies grief is of no use. It is not felt for anyone, or towards anyone. It does not drive us to greater heights of achievement, or greater kindness, or greater wisdom. It merely hinders our ability to apply the lesson shown.*

*We choose our lives before we are born. We choose our parents. We choose our lovers. We choose our trials. We prescribe for ourselves the lessons we need to learn, although we don't necessarily succeed in learning them. We also choose our deaths*

Mia read *Beyond Beyond* with interest. She was saved from outright credulity by her sense of humour; by her recognition of the fact that Anne Ambleside's beliefs, like Fillette's, like Chantal's, even Melanie's, were open to endless ridicule. If it could be made fun of so readily, the De Vos in her wondered, did it really merit serious consideration in the first place?

Nevertheless, it could not be denied that she now felt privileged, anointed, awakened to a level of Being that was the province only of those who possessed that prized quality, open-mindedness, and thus empowered. It became possible, in a small way, for her to believe that she was special.

*The idea that a soul can carry sin, or be affected by it, is farcical. An actor does not need to repent of the deeds of a villain he has played onstage. The playwright has written the part because it serves a function, the actor has given himself over, for a short time, to serving as the conduit for that function.*

*If one grasp this truth, one need never have any regrets.*

Mia was nothing if not open-minded.

The idea was there, and it put a foot out to keep the way open for other ideas, which stole in and threw open yet more doors and windows, until her moon-shaped hole, her myth-hatch, was gaping wide. In poured demons, imps, angels, archangels, thrones, principalities, sprites, nymphs, elementals, ghosts, poltergeists, phantasms, and energies treacherous and benign.

*Our bodies alone harbour what our culture has seen fit to label our 'sin.' And it is our bodies alone that suffer from the punishments we choose ourselves and mete out on ourselves.*

'What's that you're reading?' said Davy.

'A book.'

*One need never have any regrets.*

All experience is good experience, thought Mia.

'You look nice.' He was still leaning over her, undeterrable. 'Where you off to?'

'We're going to the theatre.'

'Oh, excuse me,' said Davy. 'Would you like to borrow my hopera glasses?'

Mia closed the book. 'You know, it's supposed to be your national obsession.'

But he had remote in hand, and she had lost him, thankfully, to another national obsession. 'Who does she think she is in that bikini?' said Davy to the screen. 'No one's going to vote for her once they've seen *that* bum.'

It was an accident, their theatre plans, the result of an ill-conceived phone-call the day before. As she got off the tube at Tooting and walked towards the bus-stop, her train of thought had chugged doggedly towards the image, the name, the fact, of Sebastian Maddox.

It was all Dan Brown's fault.

Leonardo da Vinci, she had thought. She had him there. There was an artist, an indisputably great artist, who had ruined no lives, his own or anyone else's. The anticipation of delivering this knock to Sebastian's know-it-all exposition of her future was enough to galvanise her into phoning Fillette to get his number as soon as she walked in the door.

'Sebastian,' he had answered after eight rings.

'Leonardo da Vinci.'

'No, this is Sebastian Maddox speaking.'

'This is Mia, Sebastian. Mia de Villiers.'

'Oh, yes. Short wench, brown hair, right? Painted my sister naked? How can I help you?'

'Leonardo,' said Mia, 'da Vinci.'

'So you mentioned. Clever chap. What about him?'

'He was a great artist, but he wasn't surrounded by suffering.'

'Ah. Leonardo is different.' Not a moment's pause. It was as if no time at all had elapsed between their last encounter and this one. This was not how Mia had envisaged her victory.

'How is he different?' she said.

'He wasn't a true artist.'

'Yes, he bloody was. How can you say that?'

'That's just how history remembers him. He was many things besides. Da Vinci happened to be brilliant at anything he tried his hand at, including art, but he wasn't a true artist, in the vocational sense. He belongs to a very select category of people who are on a completely different plane. The ordinary rules don't apply to them.'

'Homosexuals?'

'What? No. I have this theory, you see...'

'Oh no. Forget it.'

'You'll like this one.' There was shouting in the background, and the sound of something hard falling onto something else hard in the acoustics of a large indoor space. 'Just a minute,' said Sebastian. More shouting. A throaty female voice calling *No! No! No!* A brief, muffled exchange between Sebastian and whoever had requested his attention. Oh yes, simply ravishing, she overheard Sebastian saying, at which his interlocutor laughed heartily. Then he spoke into the receiver again. 'If Da Vinci had been born today he would probably have taken up quantum physics or nanotechnology or rocket science. He might've painted to relax, but you can bet your cotton socks he wouldn't have made a career of it. However, he was needed where and when he was.'

'Can you speak into the receiver?'

'Sorry. Better?'

'Yes. But I think maybe –'

'Certain people, throughout human history, have been positioned at key places, nexuses of change, if you will, in order to facilitate a paradigm shift. Jesus – oh bugger, hang on again. What is it, boy? Oh, I see what you mean. Well use the other one, then.'

Mia began to get annoyed. People should not ask you to hold during a cell phone call.

'- Christ,' Sebastian continued, 'the Buddha, Newton, Hitler, Einstein; all of these –'

'Hitler?' said Mia.

'Hang on,' said Sebastian. Yeh, she heard him saying, yeh, yeh, yeh, that's fine, just be sure and tell Bitsy to put it on the call-sheet. He cleared his throat. 'Hello?'

'Positioned by who?' said Mia.

'Whom, Minnie, whom.'

'It's 'Mia'.'

'Look, I'd love to chat, but we're in the middle of our cue-to-cue, bit chaotic. How about we continue this later?'

'Just what I was going to suggest,' said Mia.

'Great. Pick you up at eight?'

'What?'

'I could meet you somewhere if you prefer.'

'I'm busy tonight,' said Mia, immediately regretting the 'tonight', with its intimation of an amenability to alternative suggestions. It occurred to her belatedly that she should have thought it through a bit more thoroughly before making the call.

'Well Tuesday's out; that's opening night,' said Sebastian. 'Unless you'd like to come and watch?'

'I've seen it.'

'You can't have. It's the sequel. Never before seen. *A Midsummer Night's Dream II: Oberon in New York*.'

'Rubbish. I saw the posters.'

'All right. So it's not the sequel. But please come anyway. There are booster chairs available for rent.'

'You're not funny.'

'Come on, be a sport,' he said. 'You can bring your boyfriend.'

'Oh, thank you so much, I was too shy to ask.'

She and Matt arrived a little late, and even though they went for the last row, they were obliged to clamber over several knees to get to empty seats. Which, Mia supposed, was a good thing for Sebastian. The little Whitechapel theatre was packed. Scanning the audience, Mia took in a variety of hippies, wiggahs, goths, quasi-goths, visigoths, emogoths, emo regular, emo lite, emo Lavigne, emo androgynous, emo green, emo geek, trainspotting geeks, World of Warcraft geeks, Werewolf Apocalypse geeks, geek goth, geek chic, queers, graphic designers, and Rudolph Victor Adamus.

She did not need to see him from the front to know who it was. His aura took up three rows, and that was Fillette's hair next to him.

'It's Fillette and Victor,' Mia whispered to Matt, gesturing.

'The Bentley,' said Matt.

'Of course.' There had been a huge and gleaming automobile outside, over which Matt had exclaimed hurriedly.

The play started out conventionally enough, though Mia thought Theseus's admonition to Hermia and the subsequent death threat was voiced with rather too much severity, and his daughter's pleas with too sincere an anguish, for a comedy. She was soon to be wiser.

When the forest stage was set, the orchestra – a violinist, a cellist, and a flautist; positioned on the apron – began playing an eerie music, so structureless that it might have been taken to represent wind wailing through the forest. But, as a green gel came up, the voice of a fourth instrument joined the other three, the melody it described revealing the order and meaning of the accompaniment, though the mode was unfamiliar. And then Sebastian entered, with panpipes to his lips, barefoot and bare-chested, clad only in a pair of buckskin pants tied round with a chandler's cord.

He was alone on stage for at least three minutes, and Mia, despite herself, was flooded with butterflies, merely because in his position she would have had terrible stage-fright. She had always been a most excruciatingly empathetic viewer. TV was bad enough (she had, as a child, sometimes been embarrassed for Basil Fawty to the point where she had to leave the room, as other children did during the scariest parts of *bangmaak* movies) but theatre was worse, and theatre involving someone known to her was worst of all. The blood beat to her face now as the possibility that Sebastian would make a mistake in his piping superseded and honed the more generalised dread that he would fall short as an actor. It was with some relief that she realised this fear at least was in vain. He was merely miming; the flautist too had panpipes on hand, and was playing his part for him.

Sebastian himself could not have seemed more relaxed. It was easy to believe he hadn't the slightest notion he was being watched, either by the audience or the Fairy who had crept onstage halfway through his solo performance. Their introductory banter commenced, and Mia lost, by swift degrees, her projected self-consciousness, as she witnessed the joyous liberation of the agile spirit which had hitherto been restricted to Sebastian's eyes and tongue. She would not have known him; this intimate of corners and doorjambs, this loungeur. There was bounce in his limbs and play in his joints and tensile strength in his back; his movements around the stage as he flirted with the Fairy (which was unambiguously what he was doing) were half Johnny Bravo, half spring lamb.

Mia was surprised to see that Titania was played by a man; a manly man at that, sizeable, classically narrow-hipped and broad-shouldered. She cut a much more impressive and warlike figure than her quarrelsome paramour, who was portly, bearded and balding, more Silenus than King of the Wood.

Titania, delivering her lines in a stentorian contralto, wore a flowing dress studded with leaves and an overblown Louis XVI wig adorned with what looked like a deconstructed version of Mia's dreamcatcher.

The silent changeling child was played by a young man of small stature, who despite being far too old for the role – Mia guessed him at about sixteen – and having a very un-Indian pallor, at least made a remarkably convincing orphan. He had childishy padded bone structure, and a forlorn, put-upon mien, offset by the bearing of one holding his head high beneath the yoke of inexpressible persecution.

Then something strange began happening. Incrementally, the light became sicklier, the incidental music more discordant, the actors' movements more furtive and their delivery ruder. The negotiation of the sleeping arrangements between Lysander and Hermia was not light-hearted loveplay; he delivered his lines churlishly, with an air of entitlement, and as Hermia protested he tried to grapple her to the floor. She escaped weeping, and balled herself against a tree, watching her sleeping intended with mistrust, clutching her garments about her.

The play had been severely edited, and many of the lines taken out of context. From Hermia's speech upon waking only two lines remained: *Methought a serpent eat my heart away/ and you sat smiling at his cruel pray.*

At interval Mia escaped gladly: as ever over the past two years, the image of a man assaulting a woman had stirred up unwanted recollections, and this time it had also been in a forest, at night.

*We need never have any regrets.*

'You all right?' said Matt.

'What do you think of it so far?' said Mia, instead of answering.

'Your friend is very good,' said Matt, instead of answering.

They entered the foyer and Matt went to queue for drinks.



Mia quickly spotted Fillette and Victor amidst the throngs of anoraks, beanies, trench-coats and denim jackets lined with sheepskin, that emerged behind them. She tried to hide behind a pillar, but Fillette saw her, plotted her trajectory, and moved round so that Mia was within her line of sight.

'Meeeah!' she called, forcing Mia to pretend she had been looking at a dead pot-plant.

'Fillette, what a surprise,' said Mia.

'What are you doing here, darling?' said Fillette.

'Sebastian invited me,' said Mia.

'Ohhh,' said Fillette, clearly deciding somewhere around the second 'h' that this must have been the upshot of the phonecall Mia had made after requesting his number. She had not asked Mia why the number was desired.

Victor arrived at Fillette's side.

'Good evening Mr. Adamus,' said Mia, aware that she was greeting him as if he were the school principal and wondering what acceptable alternatives she might yet discover.

'Good evening Miss de Villiers,' said Victor Adamus with a little bow. 'Are you alone?'

'My Matt's getting drinks,' said Mia. She had actually said 'My Matt', she reflected, astounded at herself. Was her every exchange with Victor Adamus fated to make her look more of an idiot? She had been about to say 'my boyfriend' and had then changed her mind to 'Matt' and got stuck halfway. Now he would think she spent all her free time watching reruns of *East Enders* with her hair in curlers.

'What do you think of the opinion so far?' said Victor Adamus. 'I mean, ah, what is your opinion of the play so far?'

'Sebastian's very good,' said Mia.

'Oh, there's Mummy, she's lost us,' said Fillette. 'Mummy!' she waved her hand in the air. Mia looked across and saw the only woman in the room who could conceivably be Fillette's mother. She was surveying the crowd unhurriedly, with one hand pressed lightly to her cheek, as if looking for the stuffed olives in a supermarket.

She was not as tall as her children, but had definitely once been as striking, and certainly she stood out in this group as being of the same order of human being as Fillette and Victor. Their clothes will find each other even if they don't, thought Mia, but presently Fillette's mother spotted them and approached. She had Fillette's trick of creating an invisible forcefield against lower life forms as she travelled. Or more properly, Mia thought, Fillette had her mother's trick.

'There you are, darling,' said Fillette's mother.

'I've found Mia, do you remember, she painted me?' said Fillette, proffering Mia as though she were about to ask if she could have her for Christmas.

'Oh, is this the famous artist?' said Fillette's mother.

'Not yet,' said Mia, wondering whether Fillette would have gone so far as to show her own mother the scandalous fruits of Mia's labour. Surely not. Her Matt arrived at that moment with two glasses of wine. Mia relieved him of one so he could shake hands with Victor Adamus and be kissed by Fillette, and introduced to what turned out to be Lady Maddox. Mia tried to cover her surprise.

'One doesn't quite know what to make of it, does one?' said Fillette's mother, causing Mia a moment of dimness before she realised Lady Maddox was referring to the play, not her lineage.

'I think it's excellent,' said Victor Adamus. 'May I get you a drink, Lady Maddox?'

'Really, Victor darling, how formal,' said Lady Maddox, taking his bicep. The last time I saw you, you called me Auntie Wancy.'

'That is almost certainly untrue,' said Victor, frowning, as the chimes sounded over the PA system.

'We must sit together,' said Fillette.

'Do you think it's allowed?' said Mia.

'Why not? There were plenty of empty seats near the front.'

They filed into a relatively empty row, Matt first, then Mia, then Victor Adamus, then Fillette, and lastly Lady Maddox.

The second half of the play was even more severely edited, and the characters became progressively harder to sympathise with. The music still had that unfamiliar sound, yet to Mia it seemed nevertheless to make a kind of sense. She felt on the verge of recalling something, some response, as Puck laid his enchantment on Bottom.

Then the light turned sickly, the orchestra zithered and moaned, and Bottom came on transformed. Mia grimaced. He had not the head of an ass, but of a goat, infested with cankerous sores. His eyes were blind and bulging, and his whole body was covered in some mucilaginous substance, which dripped onto the stage in gobs. Around his neck was a garland of some sort of fruit. He was entirely naked.

*Haai nee sies, man*, said a voice from behind them, and Mia was too discomfited even to muster the token inner smile that hearing Afrikaans in London usually generated.

Bottom limped and stumbled downstage, bumping into the props, his feet sloughing on the hardwood. He uttered a lachrymose bray. There sounded from the wings a hellish hobgoblin laughter, thick with malice, and some of the other fairies emerged and began throwing things at him. Such lines as Bottom had in this form were wrenched protesting from his innards, garbled. She thought at one stage that he was speaking backwards, but later was not sure about this.

During the love scene between Titania and the goat, the action reached new depths. An elderly couple in the next row stood up and left at this point.

Near the end, during Theseus' final address, it became clear that Puck was going to be made to drink from the potion with which he had drugged the lovers.

'I'm sure that's not in this play,' whispered Matt. There was room for whispering; many audience members were talking quite freely by this time.

Puck was brought forth in stocks, and the Athenians booed him. He was bent beneath the weight of his restraints, yet he walked bravely. Mia was horribly afraid that she might cry: her throat was constricting, and there was an itch in her nostrils.

The hammering of a drum sounded from backstage.

'They're going to kill him?' whispered Mia. 'They're going to *kill him*?'

During his final address to the audience, Puck's bare chest was heaving, he looked sad and wild, and there were real tears standing in his eyes. He spoke with biting reserve, but his body, his clenched fists, were trembling with the injustice of it and the senselessness. He turned his gaze straight towards Mia as he spoke. She recoiled in her seat, laying her arms on the armrests of the chair and holding them lightly. They were made of a cheap wood and had splintered in places. One of the splinters snagged on her skin, and she made sure not to move her arm, for as long as she could feel that small nip she was sure that she would not forget that it was all make-believe. Robin Goodfellow spat out his promise of reconciliation with bitter irony, his eyes never leaving Mia's.

Just as she became convinced that she must somehow intercede, that she must help Sebastian, or Puck – she could not in that moment have said that she perceived a distinction between them – Rudolph Victor Adamus too laid his arms down on the armrests, and, the armrests being narrow, the back of his hand was laid against the side of hers, bringing their hands into contact from the swell of the heel up to the first knuckle of the little finger.

There was no mistaking the contact of their skins: the hair on the back of his hand, which she knew to be abundant and reddish in colour, was pressed quite flat between them. There was a jolt of static. Electrons leaping. If he had not at first realised that what he was touching was living flesh, he certainly must have realised when her hand twitched involuntarily. And yet he did not break the touch or even glance down; there was no evidence of surprise conveyed either through that segment of his body that was in contact with her own, nor in the blurred sliver of his profile that hovered in the ambit of her peripheral vision.

When the moment of Puck's execution came – there was no way she could be imagining it, neither could she deny that she responded, or perhaps initiated it – the pressure between her hand and Victor's increased, compressing the fleshy part of the heel of her hand and the segment of her little finger that corresponded to the neck in reflexology. At the same time, the pain from the splintered wood that had engaged the skin higher up on her forearm intensified.

Mia took Matt's hand on the other side of her, perhaps out of need, perhaps to turn Victor's touch into something that it was not; a show of solidarity, a communal prayer.

Puck was taken out of his stocks. Woodfolk and Athenians alike jeered and taunted him, even as they had jeered and taunted his hapless creation, and Puck stood and bore it. Then, toasting the audience, he drank down his poison, and collapsed.

The stage went dark.

There was a long silence. Then Victor lifted his hands – the contact broke with a small adhesive release of negative pressure which to Mia felt audible – and brought them together with air cupped between them, over and over again, to create a series of implosions rather than mere applause. Mia started at the first of these, then remembered herself as the rest of the audience followed with dazed vigour. For eight seconds, measured conveniently in half-beats by the metronome of Matt's clapping in her right ear, she did not move. Then she too applauded.

They joined the milling audience in the foyer, and Mia did not understand how everyone seemed so calm. Fillette and her mother were talking about flowers. What did flowers have to do with anything?

'Are you all right?' said Matt for the second time that evening.

'Fine.'

'They're in the car,' Lady Maddox was saying. 'Victor, would you?'

'Of course.' Victor left the building and returned shortly with an enormous bunch of roses and baby's breath.

'Oh there, they haven't suffered too badly. Shall we take them through to him?' said Fillette.

'I would embarrass him to death, I'm sure,' said Nancy Maddox.

'Oh nonsense, Mummy.'

'Really, darling, he doesn't want his mother around with all his pals in their undies. Why don't you two gorgeous girls go and give them to him rather, he would adore that. We'll wait here.' She looked at Mia then, and her Delft-blue eyes changed the quality of their focus. 'Are you quite all right, dear?' she said, with a motherly command Fillette's voice could not have achieved, or not yet, for all their similarities.

'I'm fine,' said Mia.

'You are pale.'

'I'll be fine.'

Fillette linked her arm with Mia's, took the bouquet from her mother, and located the usher to ask for directions to the green room. They went outside, over a surprisingly well-kept stretch of lawn, and round the back of the building to the stage door, which stood open.

'Yoo-hoo,' said Fillette, knocking brightly. 'Is Sebastian here?'

Oberon, seated near the door, looked up, hurriedly palming a credit card which had lain on the counter. 'In the back somewhere, I think, go on in,' said Oberon.

The green room, like all green rooms, smelled of pancake, mothballs and sweat, and the cast were standing around inside it in various degrees of undress. Bottom had already been decapitated, and was wiping his pus off with wads of tissue. His goat-head was being used as a wig-stand. Mia tried not to look at it: it was if anything more disturbing thus disembodied and framed by the mass of ringlets

which had formerly decked the shoulders of Hippolyta. Then her attention shifted, for he was there, Robin Goodfellow, alive and well.

He was still in his buckskins, standing at a stainless steel sink at the rear of the room and energetically slapping water onto the back of his neck and under his arms with a damp cigarette propped in the corner of his mouth.

Fillette called his name and he turned around, smiled with pleasure to see them. '*Grande soeur! Quelle joie!* And Mia, you came along, what fun.'

'Bravo,' said Fillette, kissing his cheek and handing him the roses, which he took with an appreciative smile, slightly ham-handed as any man accepting flowers must needs be, and set in the sink in the remains of his toilet.

'Congratulations,' said Mia, and following Fillette's example, she kissed his cheek. She wanted to throw herself upon his neck. He was alive.

'Did you enjoy it?' said Sebastian.

'We were *riveted*,' said Fillette.

Sebastian looked at Mia, who cast about for a response that could be conveyed in the tongues of men. 'It was very good,' she said at last. 'But I can't say I enjoyed it.'

'Perfect answer,' said Sebastian. 'If your reaction is a litmus test then Dane will be well satisfied. He's a Brecht worshipper, you know.'

He nodded with his eyes towards Titania, who they saw backing into the main room from behind a costume-laden clothes rack, still in drag, doubled at the waist, with the Changeling Child attached to his person in some way that was not immediately self-explanatory. All they could see from this angle were his organza-swathed lower half, his elbows milling in the air, and the northernmost layer of his immense nature-encrusted wig, from which, it gradually became evident, the Changeling Child was attempting to liberate him.

'Oh! Is that the famous Dane?' said Fillette.

'One of them,' said Sebastian. 'Dane?' he called.

'Boyl' bellowed Titania, swatting at the Changeling Child with large uncaring hands. 'You are hurting, me, Boyl'

'It's tangled,' mewled the Changeling Child.

'No bloody kidding.'

'Dane, do stop arsing about,' said Sebastian. 'Come and meet the fans.'

Titania freed himself at last from the wig with an explosive '*beh!*' of pain, and from within its recesses there presently emerged a head of fleecy blond curls, whose roots he massaged exploratively as he turned towards them. 'What ho, guests,' he stated, and wafted towards them.

Dane was larger than Mia had thought from the audience, and like Davy, his well-built body had the look, on closer inspection, that it was the product of conscientious upkeep, and might tend towards

sleek corpulence if his genes were allowed to have their way with it. He had chubby cheeks, but his face was saved from huskiness by good, manly bone structure – glitter makeup notwithstanding – heroic horizontal eyebrows and a deeply dimpled chin of the type that was referred to as a “boutjie ken” in the De Villiers family.

‘This is my sister Fillette,’ said Sebastian, ‘and her trusty sidekick, Mia...?’

‘De Villiers,’ said Mia, too scattered to object to the appellation.

‘... And this is Dane Chenevix-Trench, the man responsible for tonight’s outrages.’

‘He prefers ‘the wildly charismatic Dane Chenevix-Trench,’ said Demetrius, turning from his cold-cream. He was half again as large as Dane, and had the face and physique of a Greco-Roman wrestler.

‘Delighted, I suspect,’ said Dane Chenevix-Trench, offering a hand, the manly veins at odds with the long false nails at its end.

‘Sebastian speaks very highly of your talents,’ said Fillette. ‘But I didn’t realise you were an actor, too,’

‘It would be the height of cruelty to force Dane to choose between his two most treasured pursuits,’ said Demetrius, joining them, ‘to wit, being the centre of attention, and telling people what to do.’

‘I don’t believe anyone invited your input, Charles,’ said Dane, His words were now endowed with a chocolatey BBC modulation quite different from his Titania voice, though with the same projection.

‘Well, Miss Maddox, as I’ve been denied the pleasure of your acquaintance all these years, I do hope you will at least stay for a drink.’

‘I fear we’re intruding,’ said Fillette, looking at Bottom, who was wearing only underwear.

‘We’re all friends here,’ said Sebastian, rubbing himself dry with a towel and giving over his place at the sink to Bottom, who began washing off the remains of his glaze with stoic distaste.

‘What do you put on him to make him... ooze... like that?’ said Fillette, holding Titania’s forearm as if seeking reassurance before a thrillingly horrid sideshow exhibit. Mia was immediately reminded of the way her mother had clutched Victor’s bicep.

‘I’m glad you asked, as it took as several dozen attempts to get it right,’ said Dane. ‘It’s a mixture of Vaseline, honey and egg. Very unpleasant.’

‘You have no idea,’ said Bottom into the sink, the Cockney having been usurped by a cultivated Dublin brogue. ‘Would somebody ever disembarass one of this fabulous posy?’

Sebastian took the flowers from the sink and put them beneath his arm like a baguette.

‘Refreshments pending,’ he said to Mia. ‘Where’s our slops?’ he called across the room to Lysander.

‘Jamie Lamington’s getting it.’

Fillette continued in conversation with Dane. Mia, watching them, thought it a bizarre spectacle to see a man openly flirting with a woman who was busy complimenting him on the cut of his dress. She looked at Sebastian to see if he was also amused, but he was looking in the other direction.

Because his head was turned, the tendons in his neck were standing out, and she noted that he had that rare blessing; a neck that was thick yet graceful. His body was slight and taut. Now that she

had met their mother too, Mia wanted all three of them to pose together. For a photo, not a painting: she would do it in black and white, only their six blue eyes in colour. But as he turned back, she saw that she had been mistaken: his eyes were not blue at all, but on the green side of grey.

'Aren't you cold?' said Mia, aware that she had been caught studying his body.

'Nah, I'll take hours to cool down,' said Sebastian. He gave her a two-eyed wink, a catsmile, and said, 'I'm glad you came.'

'I'm also glad I came,' said Mia. She had gained some distance now, by the fluorescent lights, from her unease, and recognised by feel the sea-change in her patterns of thought that heralded inspiration. She was still feeling *kriewelrig*, but it was a goal-directed *kriewelrigheid*. Things had passed here that she could use. 'Thank you for inviting me. It was... an experience.'

'Not a pleasant one, by the sound of it,' said Sebastian. 'Although I think that's rather the point.'

'I didn't like it when you died,' said Mia, and knew when she saw his eyes turn gentle and cunning that there had been too much feeling in her voice.

'Poor Mia,' he said, with amused compassion. 'It's rare, the capacity to be so effortlessly distressed by art. I envy you it.'

'I'm not always,' said Mia, although what she meant was, not always by art. She had felt when she saw him by the sink the way she used to feel when she had nightmares that her mother or sisters were killed or injured, and would rise from her bed, stumbling through the dark to the relevant bedroom, to open the door and listen for easy breathing.

'I bet you cried when Bambi's mother got shot,' said Sebastian.

'I did not.'

'Hmm. Old Yeller?'

She smiled. 'I confess I did shed a tear for Old Yeller.'

'That's all right. So did I. But tell me, I'm curious. Which one of you two roped the other one in tonight?'

'Sorry? Oh, no, Fillette and I didn't come together. I had no idea she would be here.'

The swallows' wings of his eyebrows flexed as he calculated the implications of these news, and a moment later Fillette confirmed his fears.

'Come along and get dressed, Seb,' said Fillette. 'Everyone's waiting to see you.'

'Who's everyone?' said Sebastian.

'Well, Victor, and Mia's Matt, and -'

'You brought R.V.A?' hissed Sebastian.

'Yes, I brought Victor.'

'Ssshh!' said Sebastian. 'Keep it down.'

He rummaged in his togbag for one of his seemingly endless supply of black v-neck jerseys, stepped into a pair of loafers, and ushered them out into the night. 'Fillette. I told you, I can't be seen with him,' he said as soon as they were through the door.

'Oh Seb, I knew you were only joking.'

'Stop that. I hate it when you do that.'

'It's really too pathetic, how hung up you are around these friends of yours,' said Fillette. 'You used to be so unselfconscious. He was such an adorable little boy, Mia.'

'Fillette, please!'

'Fillette, please,' what?'

'For a start, dispense with this fantasy of yours that you were an adult when I was born, as opposed to a brat in a tutu who tried to force-feed me dog poo in my pram, and secondly, stop being deliberately obtuse, and thirdly, *stop pretending that you are Mother!*'

'Speaking of Mother, you might want to put that out,' said Fillette, eyeing his cigarette.

'Why?'

'She's in the foyer.'

'She's here?' said Sebastian.

'Yes,' said Fillette. 'The flowers were from her.'

'And the old man?'

'Daddy couldn't come.'

He closed his eyes in brief relief, but nevertheless followed with, 'Fillette, I could kill you. What were you thinking?'

'I was thinking that it's about time you made your family a part of your life, and that your mother would like to see her son perform once in a while.'

'All right, all right, it can't be helped now,' said Sebastian. 'Let me just finish this.'

'Well. Hurry up. Come along Mia.'

'I'm going to have a smoke too, actually,' said Mia.

Fillette set off across the dark lawn, admirably unhindered by her high heels.

'Nice work, m'lord,' said Mia.

'Oh, no,' said Sebastian. Mia laughed.

'You really are a pair of dark horses,' she said. 'Why didn't either of you tell me?'

'I'm not a lord. Let's get that straight, so don't go calling me names. Neither is my father. Not close. He's a baronet.'

'A baronette?' said Mia. 'Wouldn't that be your mother?'

'No. She's a baronetsesse.'

'Which makes you...'

'Embarrassed.'

'But you are the future...?'

'Sir Maddox. Yes.'

Mia bayed. Seb endured her derision with a long-suffering look. '*That's* why I didn't mention it.'

'Are you very rich?' said Mia, a little shyly.

'No! Not at all. Well relatively speaking, yes, I suppose, but compared to others, no.'



'Do you get a seat in the House of Lords?'

'Don't be daft. All that was done away with yonks ago.'

'Are you landed gentry? Will you inherit land?'

'There's none left, besides Woughton.'

'Oooh, Woughton.'

'It's *just* – a *house* – and grounds.' He was sucking intensely at the last of the cigarette as he spoke and now threw the butt to the bricks and crushed it beneath his loafer. 'The last of what we had by way of acreage was sold to the state back in great-grand-père Maddox's time.'

'Oh.' She paused, a little disappointed. 'What do you get?'

'Nothing. I told you, it's not that special.'

'You get nothing at all?'

'No. Well one thing.'

'What?'

'When I shuffle off this mortal coil, I am entitled to,' and he intoned: "a pall supported by two men, a principal mourner, and four others."

'So the only benefit is something you get after you die.'

He shrugged, smilingly. 'Told you. It's not that special. Come, let us go and face my destiny, shall we?'

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'It was rather *brutal*, darling,' said Lady Maddox. 'Did they really have to put you to death?'

After greeting her son, she had immediately taken responsibility for shepherding the conversation. Most of the audience had departed, but those that remained glanced across with open curiosity at the knot of money surrounding the late Robin Goodfellow. Sebastian smiled and nodded curtly at those who greeted him from afar, and refused to focus his attention on any of his party. 'Well, you see, it's symbolic,' he said, looking over his shoulder towards the entrance.

'It's the death of the imagination,' said Victor Adamus. Sebastian looked at him in surprise. 'Is that about right?'

'Close,' Sebastian allowed.

'I would very much like to meet the director,' said Victor.

'No!' said Sebastian, causing Victor to practically blink in shock. Sebastian was saved from having to explain this outburst by the arrival at his elbows of Avril Lavigne and Kelly Osbourne.

'You were *amazing*, Sebastian,' said Avril Lavigne, letting a hand trail down his forearm like a thrown egg.

'I didn't get it,' said Kelly Osbourne. 'What was up with that goat thing? Isn't it supposed to be a donkey?'

'It's *symbolical*, Yolanda,' said Avril Lavigne.

'But, like, you can't change Shakespeare,' said Kelly Osbourne.

'I had wondered the same thing,' said Lady Maddox accommodatingly. 'Isn't it rather frowned upon to take such liberties with the Bard?'

'No, Mother, you see, it's an intertext,' said Sebastian.

'How can a goat be an intertext? Really, darling, theatre is becoming very inaccessible in the hands of your generation. Don't you find, Victor?'

'If I'm not mistaken,' said Victor quietly, 'the goat was a scapegoat.' For the second time Sebastian looked at him with surprise. '*The scapegoat of Athens*. Yes?'

'Yes,' said Sebastian, throwing another furtive glance towards the entrance.

'Well. Perhaps you can explain it all to us over a drink, or a late supper?' said Lady Maddox.

'Um,' said Sebastian.

'Victor, darling,' said Fillette. 'Since we're all here together, and probably never will be again, why don't we take them to see your gallery?'

'Your gallery?' said Mia. 'You have a gallery?'

'It's not finished yet,' said Victor Adamus.

'You mean an art gallery?' said Matt.

'It's a community-building project,' said Victor to Mia. 'I tried to tell you, once.'

'Oh, that gallery! Is it nearby?' said Lady Maddox.

'Fairly. It's in Old Street.'

'Do let's,' said Fillette.

'At this hour of the night?' said Sebastian.

'The security's there,' said Victor. 'But it's just a building, at present. We really will be going to see the *gallery*. There's nothing actually in it.'

'Oh, it's so close,' said Fillette, 'and as Mummy said, when are we ever all going to be in the area at the same time again?'

'I would certainly appreciate your eye,' Victor said, still addressing Mia.

Mia looked at Matt. He was preparing for yet another set of exams, and had his free time budgeted to the minute. 'I can spare another hour,' he said.

'I'm afraid I'm going to have to bow out,' said Sebastian, who did indeed look afraid. Mia, following his eye towards the entrance, saw what she thought might be Dane Chevenix-Trench from behind, his arms crossed mummy-fashion over his chest with either hand on the opposite shoulder. Mia did a mental double-take: she had noticed that Sebastian liked to stand that way too. Dane was now wearing a black jersey identical to Sebastian's, both in cut and size, which meant it fit his larger frame much more snugly, and was talking to a man wearing large tinted sunglasses and a baseball cap. When she turned to the party again, Sebastian had disappeared.

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An impressive edifice of black steel and glass, The Adamus Gallery is a subdued example of the lavishly anti-rectilinear school of architectural thought that has latterly descended upon the London skyline as Hannibal descended from the Alps; implausibly, contentiously, and to many bemused inquiries as to whether this was supposed to be some sort of a practical joke. At the time that Mia's party arrived to look at it, three faces of the building were still embraced – restrained, to Mia's eye – by scaffolding.

As the headlights glanced against the great glass door, the building seemed to Mia to direct its attention towards them, gaping, with a cautionary, slightly Mongoloid, gaze. It's eyes follow you, she said to Matt, as they continued round to the parking area. Matt laughed and agreed. She was referring, he saw, to the two visible skylights set around the circumference of a domed topknot to the structure. Victor and the Maddox women neither laughed nor agreed, because they were three metres away in the Bentley.

All five of them could have fit quite comfortably in the one vehicle, but Matt and Mia had decided to take their own car so that they could get home as quickly as possible afterwards. Matt was intending to study until midnight that night.

'Who did it, Victor?' said Lady Maddox when they had all assembled at the bottom of the stairway to the entrance.

'Stefan Gudmundsson,' said Victor Adamus.

'Ah,' said Lady Maddox. 'Should I know of him?'

'My advisors inform me that he's the next big thing. Or has built it. Or is going to build it. I'm not really sure.'

'When are you planning to open?' said Matt.

'The latest prognosis is July,' said Victor.

'July? But it looks finished already,' said Mia.

'Wait till you see inside,' said Victor morosely. He pressed the buzzer at the security door, and a moment later it clicked ajar. Mia said under her breath to Matt that the security couldn't be that good if the guard didn't even ask who it was, but Matt pointed out the CCTV camera.

'Evening, Craig,' said Victor to the security guard who had risen to greet them.

'Good evening, sir,' said the security guard, and Mia knew from the way the last syllable slid out breach-birthed that he was a Durbanite. He returned to his post, which at the moment was no more than a chair next to a mounted screen. Mia decided not to speak. She was not in the mood for the necessary exchange that her accent would prompt.

'Do you have them here twenty four hours?' said Matt when they were out of earshot.

'Just at night,' said Victor. 'So this is the foyer, obviously.'

Mia found her eye immediately beckoned upwards, as in a cathedral, by the lines of the architecture, and thus she discovered that they were standing beneath the imposing groined vault that formed the ceiling of the dome they had seen from outside.

'And there's room One and Two,' Victor went on. 'Rather uninspired, I know, but we'll rename them once we figure out who we owe the most – and then, you can't see it from here, but we'll get there, there's room Three.'

The interior of the building did indeed smack of a work in progress. The air here was cold and substantial, each breath entering the lungs with the congested scent of silica behind it. The floors and walls were bare cement, and there were lengths of electric cable Giegering up against the walls. But the spaces were impressive, the ceilings high. A doorway led off from the foyer, and in front of it, a stairwell ran up to another on the second floor.

'Come,' said Victor, striding. 'Come through.'

Beyond the foyer, Mia saw that what she had taken to be a second floor was in fact empty space. The doorway at the top of the stairs opened onto a slim and slightly bowed bridge, like a spine, suspended from the ceiling and cantilevered against the far northern wall, such that it ran transverse across the room. At its far end was another doorway. 'So this is our skywalk,' said Victor, pointing to the structure. 'Just put it up this week.' He was visibly enthused, which for him meant scowling more and speaking faster.

'It all looks marvellously impressive, Victor, dear,' said Lady Maddox. 'I don't know where you managed to find the time. What are you going to put in it?'

'Well. The idea is that the gallery should be a platform for the art community as a whole,' said Victor. 'At every level, but particularly for new blood and fresh ideas. So Room Two will be, shall we go through?... This room,' Victor resumed when they had followed him through the connecting doorway, 'will unofficially be for an artist who is just beginning to hit the big time, and has made a few waves and a bit of a name for him- or herself.'

This second room had a mezzanine level, Mia now saw, which split the space into two. From the mezzanine one could enter a second storey room.

'...We mean it to become a sort of sought-after feather in one's cap to get invited to exhibit in here,' Victor continued. 'I've got a panel dealing with the hopefuls for the first batch.'

'All this space?' said Matt. He pointed towards the mezzanine. 'That too?'

'Ah, we haven't quite decided about that,' said Victor. 'It would depend on the nature of the work. If it's installation, you see, something like, what is it? That sculpture that won the Turner Prize, the dissected sperm whale – '

'Van Meulen,' said Mia.

'That's right. Then we won't have anything on the walls downstairs, just up there, and this centre area will be given over to three-dimensional work. Then the other space...' he was walking as he spoke, his voice echoing darkly at them from all directions. '...will be for work by a selection of established artists, old and new, on loan, mostly, and Room Three, the smaller one, up there...' He

pointed up. to the second-storey room. '...is for an emerging artist, who must have had no more than two exhibitions before that weren't self-funded, the idea being to help along artists who have had little or no exposure. Then over there, across the garden, we'll have the restaurant.'

'There's a garden?' said Mia.

'There will be. Behind the plaza. There's a bistro in the way at the moment. So we'll have the restaurant downstairs, and above it, four studios. Or six. We're still consulting on size.'

'Studios!' said Lady Maddox. 'You mean, to actually paint in?'

'Yes, to paint in. The feeling we're going for is that the art here is not for the elite to gaze on, but that this should rather be an organic, vibrant place, where art is *happening* even as you walk around and look at what's been done. The feeling that you can connect the artist to his work, even though it won't necessarily be the same people in that building as the work in this building, do you... I'm trying to remember how my designer put it... so that we explode the gap between the process and the finished piece –'

Mia, smiled broadly. 'You mean, like, delayed performance art.'

'Yes,' said Victor, mulling it over. 'Yes, exactly. Do you mind if I use that?'

'Use it?'

'For the press.'

'Oh. Sure.'

'I can attribute it to you, if you like.'

'No no, that's all right.' *He means, like, delayed performance art, says London masseuse Mia de Villiers*, she thought.

'The elevator is not in working order yet,' said Victor, so we'll have to go by the skywalk to get up to Room Three. If you're interested. There's not much there yet, but you'll be able to look through and see the second site.'

Lady Maddox protested that she had no head for heights and was wearing high heels, and Fillette said she would stay downstairs to keep her mother company, so it was Mia, Matt and Victor who went back through to the stairwell. Mia thought of taking her shoes off – the skywalk did look treacherous – but on her feet was only hose, and she thought she would be in even more danger without the tread on her boots. The structure swung alarmingly as they set out across it.

'You'll have to hold on to the cables,' said Victor, turning towards her. Mia stepped out, moving from cable to cable. These crossed over like strings in a grand piano, forming a 'V'. She looked behind her. Matt had not yet left the stairwell.

Mia went to stand beside Victor. 'What are you going to do with the wallspace in there?' she said, pointing towards the foyer.

'Ah, I'm glad you asked. I have a little plot for that, though it's not yet official. I'd like to have a fresco there. I'm going to invite proposals, and then my panel will vote on who gets the commission.'

'That's a nice idea,' said Mia. 'Do you want a proper *buon fresco*?'

'That's what I had in mind.'

'You might want to consider...' said Mia, and then stopped.

'Please,' said Victor.

'You might want to consider a canvas mural instead. There's a lot of advantages to it. It doesn't have that same Classical feel, but then, that Classical feel has been reproduced in so many casinos and shopping malls and hotel bathrooms across the globe that it runs the risk of looking, well, not tacky, but you know, it seems to have become the *nouveau riche* idea of the height of...' she stopped again, biting her lip too late.

'Go on,' said Victor, with more grace than she had suspected in him.

'It's just, well, a bit overdone,' she continued hurriedly, hoping that somewhere in the next few sentences she could save the moment, or at least spackle over it. 'It can look more like interior design than art. With a canvas mural, you get the effect of a fresco, but with the feel of an oil painting.'

A face turning up from below made her look down. Matt had descended the stairwell again.

'That's interesting,' said Victor. 'Is it done like a normal painting?'

'Absolutely, except for the installation.'

Matt was studying the skywalk from underneath, with an exacting eye, like a pole-vaulter. He seemed unaware that to the casual observer – Victor, say – it looked very much as if he was staring up Mia's dress.

'Then there's another argument for it. The competition won't just be for specialists.'

'It can also be done off-site, which is useful if you're still building and there's dust and so on flying around. The other thing is, if the building is ever knocked down, or you decide you want to move a wall, your buon fresco gets destroyed. But a canvas can be taken down and moved.'

Victor nodded as she spoke. 'So it would be an asset in itself, as opposed to part of the value of another. I'll have to think about that seriously,' he said. 'You see, I was right in thinking you would have a good eye. I do hope you will enter the competition.'

'Me?'

'Why not?'

Mia looked at the size of the wall involved and thought it would be a miracle if Victor managed to run a competition, select a winner and get the work done before July.

Matt was now at the top of the stairs again. She wished he would stop looking at them as if they were about to die.

'What do you see there? As a subject,' said Victor. 'I was thinking about an abstract piece.'

'Hmm,' said Mia dubiously.

'No?' said Victor.

'I'd have to think about it,' said Mia, although long before he had asked, her mind had already projected the answer against the blank wall: trees.

'If you were to work up a proposal, I'd be delighted to hear your ideas,' said Victor. 'It's all right,' he called to Matt, who was, at last, stepping onto the skywalk, twice with each foot, touch-step, touch-step, like a Scout walking on scree. 'It does sway. It's perfectly safe.'

'I'm not convinced it is,' said Matt. 'Safe.'

'We'll have railings on it soon.' There had, he explained to Mia, been an extensive battle between the interior designer and the architect over the matter of the railings on the skywalk. Mr. Dyer felt strongly that railings would ruin the lines of the structure, and by extension, the lines of the whole building. The architect had been certain that not having railings would eventually cause problems with the safety inspector, and they would just be forced to add them later.

'It's not that,' said Matt. 'It's not the motion that I'm concerned about. It's the weight. This whole structure is cantilevered on that shelf alone, right?' he said. 'And that shelf is unsupported.'

'That's why we have the cables.'

'Hmm. Yes,' said Matt. 'You need struts.' He pointed. 'There.' He pointed again. 'And maybe there.'

What did he know, thought Mia, he was an accountant, not an architect, and who was he to come here and talk about struts? They had professionals.

'My structural engineer doesn't seem to think so,' said Victor.

They had a *structural engineer*. 'It's supposed to sway, honey,' said Mia. 'Like the Millennium Bridge.'

Matt frowned and declined either to respond or step any further out on the skywalk. He was staring past them at the other end of it. Mia had an annoying suspicion he was doing math in his head. That was usually what he was doing when he forgot to answer her. She turned back to Victor. He was holding out a business card. She took it, looked at it blankly, as if he had given her a breadbin. Adamus Rudolph Victor Adamus, CEO, it said beneath the name of the investment consortium. 'Thank you,' she said, and wondered what she might give him in return.

'When you're ready, we'll set up a meeting.'

'Oh!' He had not just been making talk. 'All right. Shall I come to your...' Mansion? Bat-Lair? '...office?'

'Do.'

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Mia, picking up the phone the next Monday, wondered for a moment whether she shouldn't leave it for another week or so, allow him to simmer, then chided herself for behaving as if he was a boy she was interested in. This was not Cape Town, that had not been a social invitation, and Victor Adamus was no boy. She dialled.

The secretary, to her surprise, appeared to have been expecting her call. 'Mr. Adamus wondered whether you would like a car sent for you,' she said once they had arranged a date and time.

'A car? No, that's all right,' said Mia.

'It's the great big black job off The Strand, you can't miss it,' the secretary (Dinah) had said when Mia confessed she did not know where to go.

As Mia passed the Temple Bar Monument, and one glossy corner of the building thrust into sight, she wondered how she *had* managed to miss it when she passed this way before. It was not the largest building in the area or even on the block, but like the gallery, it made an impression. It was a mother-ship of a structure; a sleek and potent-looking quadrangle of black glass and marble whose sloping surfaces shimmered opaquely, mirage-like, in the grime-laden light.

This was not the command centre of Victor's business, but of the Adamus Foundation. The name was emblazoned above the entrance. It was only once she saw the A in Adamus, rearing above its neighbours like the dorsal fin of a killer whale, that her nerves began to jangle.

On the tube, she had felt, more strongly than anything else, a quiet elation, enjoying the glances she imagined were falling her way, and the guesses she was sure were being made as to her business in the city. She had the smaller of her two portfolio cases beside her, and although it was shabby and worn, no art student on the way to class would be wearing a tailored pinstripe pants-suit from Harvey Nics, or have her hair in a French roll, or make last minute notes with quite such level-headed impatience, a pen switching smartly in the web between thumb and index finger. They would think her a designer with an advertising firm. The truth was if anything better.

Her bravado abandoned her as she signed the register at the reception desk, making way for a rising wave of false nausea that intensified as the elevator climbed towards the top floor.

'Miss de Villiers?' said the secretary on his floor.

'Yes.'

'You can go through,' she said. 'End of the hall.'

The door to Victor's office was ajar, and as Mia reached to knock, her pulse hammered in her ears.

Victor Adamus looked hazy in the afternoon sun, ill-defined, the light catching the red in his shaggy hair, as it caught the red in hers. He was standing behind an ebony desk, frowning down at a letter which he held in both hands as if it were bound to try and escape. 'Mr. Adamus?' she said, interrupting him just as the paper he held was on the point of bursting into flame. He balled the letter in one fist and tossed it into an unseen wastepaper bin.

He had looked up when she entered, but he did not look at her as he greeted her, and he offered her neither smile nor handshake as he invited her to sit down.

Mia sat in the leather chair indicated. She laid her portfolio case across her knees, then, on second thought, propped it next to the chair. Victor Adamus remained on his feet.

'Can I offer you anything to drink?' he said. 'We're still waiting for Mr. Dyer.'

'Mr. Dyer?'

'My interior designer, I asked him to join us.'

'Oh! That was...' very unexpectedly official sounding. '...nice of you.' She wished she had spent another hour on her second sketch.



'Anything to do with the inside of the building has to go through him. He's coming by underground from the gallery though, so we may wait a while yet.'

'Yes, the strike,' said Mia, who had left home an hour early in case there were delays. 'But, Mr. Adamus, if I may, I thought we were just going to throw some ideas around. For the competition.'

'Ah, the competition. Yes, well. After further reflection and discussion I've more or less given up on that idea. Too much planning, too expensive to publicise. We are, unfortunately, and inevitably, behind schedule, and over budget.'

'So you said.'

He began pouring two whiskey and sodas, although she had not asked for one. 'What we're going to do instead is form a short list – a very short list – of artists, and go down from the top until we find someone who is up for the job.'

Then what am I doing here? Thought Mia.

'You are on the list, Mia,' said Victor, before she had quite allowed herself to consider this possibility. He handed her a glass. 'Provisionally. Or you will be. Once Dyer and I have had a look –' he cast his eyes towards her portfolio '– at whatever's in there.'

'I hadn't, I'm not prepared for any sort of formal presentation,' said Mia.

Victor regarded his own glass, trapping rainbows. 'Just tell him what you told me,' he said.

Two hours later Mia emerged out into the street, in her hands clutched the portfolio, in her head clutched the astonishing suspicion that she had just, unofficially, received the commission for the Adamus Gallery mural.

Mr. Dyer had been less than enthusiastic about her pitch, although Mia thought she could safely take this as a reflection of his character rather than her work. She could tell immediately that he had the micromanaging gene. It was in the hands, the way they fluttered and patted: he didn't want anyone to touch anything, or do anything, or say anything, that had anything to do with the Adamus Gallery without his exhaustive approval, and if he were ten people he would just as soon do it all himself.

'Now, here, we'd have a big mirror,' Mia had said, pointing at a floor-plan the designer had produced at her request.

'A mirror?' said the designer, as if she'd suggested hanging an upside-down crucifix.

'Behind the reception desk.'

'Behind the reception desk?'

'Yes, running the entire length of the wall –'

'A mirror running the entire length of the wall behind the reception desk?' He plucked appealingly at Victor Adamus's clothes with his enormous sensitive eyes, but did not interrupt again as, over the next half hour, she explained her idea, feeling all the while that she was coming nowhere close to

conveying her vision, even with the aid of the sketches. She wished she could have shown Victor what she saw; transplanted it directly from her head into his. She would never in a million years have admitted to Victor, let alone Mr. Dyer, that the bulk of her practical knowledge on canvas murals came not from university, but from Cassie's mother.

Mia walked on quickly past the oddly un-dragonish Temple Bar dragon, towards the underground. The sun was beginning to set. A chill had settled on her skin, but inside her the blood thumped hot hot hot. She felt like an inside-out baked Alaska. He must have meant it, she could not have read him wrong. Already she had learned that from him, constructive criticism was the closest one was likely to come to a compliment. And unlike most flattery, his brand of sweet talk bred action. And money. Oh, yes.

After Mr. Dyer had left, Mia had lingered to thank Victor for the opportunity. In light of the old adage about things that seemed too good to be true, she had been hoping to get a better idea of what had or had not been almost said during the previous hour.

'I'm extremely grateful,' she said to him. 'I don't know why you gave me this chance on the strength of one painting, but thank you.'

'I wish you the best of luck,' said Victor Adamus.

'I really didn't think you liked my work at all,' Mia went on, against her better judgement. 'Not after the way you all ribbed me that night.' She tried for Fillettesque mock-reproof.

'Ribbed you?' As if he might require a definition rather than a reminder.

'When you were joking with that restaurateur, at Fillette's. Haggling over the nude.'

'Joking? I most certainly wasn't joking. I have bought the painting.'

'But... I saw it on Fillette's wall the other day!'

'It will remain in Fillette's keeping. But I own it.' He turned the full fury of his gaze on her. 'No I wasn't joking. And I don't think he was either.'

'But, he must have been.' Under no other conversational banner would the restaurateur, at least, have conceivably shouted bids across a dining room table.

'It is a painting for a restaurant,' said Victor. 'A nice bourgeois restaurant for people who want to forget their troubles for an evening.'

'Oh,' said Mia. 'Why did you buy it, if it's so terrible?'

'I never said it was terrible, said Victor. 'A little derivative, perhaps, but not terrible.'

'All art is derivative,' said Mia, deeply shaken. These words stung all the more for the fact that Victor did not appear to be aware that he was saying anything offensive. Like all the most cutting insults, it was absolutely unintentional, and, it followed, absolutely sincere. 'Even Picasso said that every artist is a thief.'

'Do you know what he meant by that?'

'He meant that, that there's nothing truly original, that everyone borrows from what has gone before.'

'Oh,' said Victor, blinking, as if he had never considered this angle. 'Perhaps so. But nevertheless, you will do better. It was an investment, since you ask. In you, and for me. I suspect that it will one day be worth a fair amount. The Early Restaurant Period of Mia de Villiers.'

'De Vos,' she said, defensively.

'De quoi?'

'De Vos. It's my mother's maiden name. I'm using it as my professional name.'

'Well,' said Victor. 'Well, well, Mia the Fox, I shall follow your career with interest.'

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'Are you stealing my soul?' said Sam.

'We'll see.' She thought she might have. If there was any truth to the myth, then it was surely to be found in photos taken unawares. There was no moment more Sam than he had been then, she thought, his attention curled around some small task with infinite care.

But then he looked up, and she realised she was wrong about that.

He had been looking down at something in his hands, but he met her eyes now, and her own widened. The grey irises were brilliant, effulgent, the colour of stormclouds lit from within by lightning. His skin mantled in holy fire, and his face beautiful and terrible as an archangel's.

Then she looked beyond him, and saw it was everywhere.

Shadows you could pick up and sling over your shoulder. Contours that bucked and plunged. Anything that had purple or orange or pink in it, the light seemed to cling to it, or it seemed to cling to the light. Perhaps this was the unsung opposite of 'poor light,' thought Mia. Rich light.

'Look,' said Mia. 'Look at the edges of things.'

Sam looked. 'He-ectic,' he said.

'I wish you could see your eyes,' said Mia.

'I wish you could see *yours*.' He held out his hand for the camera. 'Is that thing loaded?'

'There should be one more.'

She thought he would aim at the mountains, but he turned and began to focus the lens on her. She didn't want him to. No camera, no matter how advanced, and no painter, no matter how skilled, could capture this. It was transient by nature. A gift taken back almost as soon as it was given.

'It's a black and white reel,' she said. 'You won't get these colours.'

'You'll still look beautiful,' said Sam. 'Trust me.'

The shutter clicked, and the camera sounded its senile backwards burble. He gave it back to her, and she took the film out, replaced it with a second, stowed the camera in its case, stowed the case in

her bag, stowed the word in the place she kept such things now. *Beautiful*. He was facing the dam again.

'How would we know if we were dead?' said Sam. 'Perhaps this is all the afterlife is. Everything the same, except more so.'

'Then I like it,' said Mia.

'I like it, too,' said Sam. 'I'm glad they let me take my girls with me.' One smile for her, and then he looked up again, towards the water, where his other girl swam alone, floating face down.

'How would we know if *she's* dead?' said Sam, his voice joking, but his arms preparing to raise him to his feet, in case.

At that moment Cassie turned face-up, slowly, and sculled herself in a slow circle, with her feet remaining in one place, like the hour hand of a clock. Sam unlocked his elbow.

'I wonder if she's noticed,' said Mia.

Already the sky was fading, flattening, as if three dimensions had never meant anything more than this.

There, said Sam. We're alive.

It was something Cassie would not have understood, or would have derided, or dissected, or deconstructed, until the kernel of magic at its heart was sere and dead and it was no good to anyone. About the light; that it was given in order to be taken away, that they had it in order to lose it. Mia was about to say something to this effect, but Sam got there first, in an absent sing-song drawl, as if he had picked up a stray frequency:

*And Chuck said God is an Indian-giver  
I don't trust nothin' but the Mississippi River.*

Mia rested her arms on her knees and the side of her face on her arm.

'What were you making, anyway?' she said.

He opened his palm, and showed her. 'For you,' he said. 'It's good luck.'

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There stands at Kilgrey a small stone chapel with six modest stained glass windows which glow for an hour each morning at five in midsummer and nine in midwinter, spilling costume jewels of blue, green, amber and lollipop-red onto the hobbit-sized pews, the flagging, and whoever was inside, which these days usually meant no one, and today, meant Cassie and Daniel Shaech.

They happened to be there when the sun shook free of the mist at eight-thirty on Easter Sunday, glancing against the east-facing rose window and catching them in its sweet rhinestone glow, and Cassie stopped in her tracks, enchanted.

Like the schoolhouse, the chapel had been built when the Kilgrey estate served as a school, and it had been furnished with children in mind. No imperious apostles, no Golgotha. Instead, one window depicted a nativity, baby in manger with the animals and kings crowding round, another had Jesus in Nazareth on his donkey with a shout about its ears and palms before its feet, and a third, a small fleet of fishing vessels tossed on a faceted ocean. The windows struck her, endearingly, as looking more like the play-play stained glass windows one makes in junior school with cellophane sweet wrappers and cardboard than the real thing.

Flecks of coloured light moved on Danny's face as he regarded her. It was the first time he had yet looked her in the eyes, and there was a change in his own. Not just because of the light. His attention had been drawn out of himself, and onto her.

'Pretty, isn't it?' said Cassie. Danny dropped his gaze.

She took an egg from her basket and put it in the corner of one of the pews. Then she went to the piano, which stood, back to the wall, beside the pulpit, and put another beneath its lid, which complained loudly when she lifted it. On second thought, she took the egg out again and put it behind one of the piano's legs. If no one found it, it might melt in summer and ruin the felt mat. These did not strike her as oft-tickled ivories.

She wondered, fitfully, where Susannah was; and what the chances were of offloading Danny onto someone else. She had hoped to explore the grounds a little before they all met back at the farmhouse.

The Kilgrey Easter Egg Hunt was the largest of its kind in the Scottish Lowlands by a wide margin, and the opening event of a two-day fund-raising festival which had been held every year for the past decade. Cassie, Justin, and Susannah had arrived before first light, and along with the other volunteers, who were mostly family of the residents and friends of the staff, they had dispersed with baskets made by the residents to sow the two and half thousand Easter eggs provided by sponsors.

The car trip up had been more amicable than Cassie had anticipated. She had sat in the back of Susannah's Volkswagon, and spoken little, while Justin and Susannah chatted restfully and altogether unremarkably about mutual friends and their doings. Either they had grown tired of provoking one another, or Cassie on her own did not constitute a grand enough audience to merit a display.

Susannah, dressed in denims and walking shoes, and wearing no make-up, had looked unlike herself. As they left the streetlights behind them and entered agraria, she started humming.

'Bloody mist,' said Justin. 'Drive slowly.'

'I love the mist,' said Susannah.

When they turned down the Kilgrey road, she slowed the car to a crawl and pointed to the horizon beyond the field. 'There,' she said. 'This has always been my favourite time of day here; when that strip of light appears.'

'It's a good strip of light, Suse,' said Justin.

They were among the first to arrive at the meeting-point at the schoolhouse. Voices preceded the figures that emerged from the greyness of the Shire into the pool of fog-hung light around the parking lot. Someone had a referee's whistle and was blowing it, trying to get people to divide themselves into groups. Cassie, still bleary-eyed and bundled up like a snow-cone in the thick white parka Lynn had given her for Christmas, was transported back to the days of school camps, track meets and Blisters for Bread. She treated all those she had not met before to the same wan smile, forever worried about confusing a staffer with a resident, or vice versa.

Susannah stood apart with Toby, Justin and Danny, jumping up and down to warm herself and laughing as Danny jumped with her.

She had greeted not just her own brother, but the entire Carmichael family, with an uncomplicated warmth which Cassie found disconcerting. It was only marginally less disconcerting to see it abundantly reciprocated, in the form of prolonged strapping embraces from the brothers Carmichael and kisses from their parents, George and Jean.

'Ah, all together,' Jean Carmichael had said, taking Susannah's hand. 'Such a pity Luke isn't here.'

'When is he coming back?' asked Justin.

'Oh, soon,' Jean Carmichael had said. 'Luke is in London,' she said to Cassie.

'Really?' said Cassie, who had thought he was in Durham.

The egg-planters had set off en masse from the schoolhouse at about seven, accompanied by those of the residents who had expressed a desire to join in. Cassie had started out in the company of Aaltje, Danny, Justin and Susannah, but they had gradually drifted apart from one another, and at some point, she had found herself alone with Danny.

She was a little nervous about having him suddenly in her care, and had decided to make her way back to the central cluster of buildings around the Shire until she could find one of the staffers to take charge of him. She would need to reload with eggs soon anyway.

'You want to put one here, by the piano?' she said. Danny was folding the tinfoil wrapper of an Easter egg into tinier and tinier squares. He didn't answer.

His gestures and body language were a strange mix of seventeen-year-old gangly strength and seven-year-old unconcern. Cassie had learned better than to ask what was 'wrong' with him, but she presumed, based on his lack of interest in his surroundings, and what she had learned was his chronic silence, that he suffered from some variation on the theme of autism. Using the term 'suffers from' was probably comparably objectionable to the term 'wrong with', she thought. And was it preferred to have autism or to be autistic, come to that? Was he allowed to be 'mute'?

Danny was still holding that stuffed dog. There were smears of chocolate on its face.

'He *spoke*?' Justin had said when he inquired about the question Danny had asked her at New Year's. 'To *you*?'

'Ah, yes,' said Cassie. 'Is that unusual?'

'He hardly ever speaks. Really. He speaks maybe once or twice a year.'

'Do you have any idea who he meant?' said Cassie.

'No idea,' said Justin. 'Ask Martin.'

Martin was Danny's official care-giver, and knew as much as one could know about him, but he had reacted in the same way as Justin: no inkling of who Sam might be, and surprise that Danny had said anything at all.

Walking the length of the chapel wall, Cassie put an egg in the corner of each stained glass window with a casual hand. She had planted over three hundred already.

At the last sill, she hesitated. She had come across what, at first glance, she took to be a dead rodent. At second glance she thought it might be a spider's nest, and at third glance, examining it with distaste, she found her first guess had been closer, because there were definitely parts of a dead rodent, or several, within it. Tiny bones, a great deal of hair, bits of feather, and some unidentifiable binding substance.

'Don't touch it, Danny,' she said to her ward, who had reached a hand towards the disagreeable bolus.

Cassie turned to look for other hiding places. Perhaps the altar. But approaching it, she heard furtive sounds, of movements definitely not human. Cassie peered.

A face leered back at her, a moon of a face, Dante gone Cronenberg, a lotus-eater's bad trip, and my, what big wings it had, this calf-eyed angel of death. It cloaked them at her warningly and screamed. The sound bounced through the chapel, and its originator launched itself from the alcove in

which it had been perching, swooped over their heads, flapped its wings once, twice, and departed soundlessly through the chapel door.

Cassie had been too shocked to scream when the owl did it for her, and she let the sound escape now slowly between her teeth in a voiced hiss, zzzz.

From outside Cassie heard human exclamations, backed by an insane, high-pitched yowl. She went to the entrance to see Justin and Susannah, together with a bat-eared mongrel dog that she had noticed tearing across the moor earlier. As she watched, the latter engaged in a series of springbok-like leaps straight up into the air, yodelling. All three were staring into the middle distance with startled expressions.

'Did you see the owl?' called Cassie, interested to note that the splitting of the company had resulted in these two choosing to remain in each other's.

'Aye,' called Justin and Susannah together.

Cassie came out into the cold sunlight. She had taken Danny's hand, as she had seen Aaltje doing with Cameron. His grip on her own was disquietingly manly.

'What are you doing with Danny?' said Susannah.

'He followed me,' said Cassie. 'I'm not doing anything with him.'

'You're not supposed – ' Susannah started, but then she stopped herself. 'All right, Dan?' she said. Danny did not respond.

Changing her mind about joining them, Cassie delivered Danny into his sister's keeping, and told Justin she would see them back in the Shire at ten.

She had very few eggs left to hide, but she was still in the mood to explore, so she walked along the moor, dropping the odd egg by the odd tussock and admiring the daffodils that had begun to push up by the roadside.

Wandering down onto the Kilgrey Road earlier, she had come across a narrow footpath stretching uphill, into the forested escarpment, and decided now to return there and see where it led.

She followed it up a stiff climb, out of the forest again, and into the pastures, and so to a fence that divided the sheep's grazing from the cows'. She saw Gandalf and another horse, a very dark bay, in the second field. There was a gate, but it was locked, so she climbed over the fence, hoping the animals would ignore her.

From here the path led again into the forest, and the daffodils gave way to snowdrops. There were hoof-prints along this stretch of it, and a little further on the path branched into two. Cassie could hear rushing water in the distance in the direction of one branch; the one that led deeper into the trees, and chose instead to follow the hoof-prints, which continued along the other branch, in the direction of the farmhouse.



The path took her by the ruins of a wall, or two walls, forming the corner of what might once have been a house or an outbuilding. Snowdrops grew thick in its shelter. Here the path branched again, one route leading down to the Shire, another going uphill. Cassie followed the uphill path until the slope crested, and the trees thinned out to nothing. Here the path ended, and before her stood a bench.

Cassie was a little disappointed that the trail should lead to such modest treasure, but as she was out of breath anyway, and because it seemed expected of her, she sat down on the bench, facing east, towards the crest of a second hill.

She could now see the full extent of the forest, and realised that the part of it that fringed the Kilgrey road was but a tentacle of a much larger beast. The trees ran ragged up the second hill, and on beyond towards Edinburgh.

Looking out at this view, she became aware gradually of a strange visual effect. At first she thought she was just dizzy from the climb. Then she thought she might be getting a migraine, but when she turned to look behind her at the hill she had just ascended, the pasture, the sheep in it, and the schoolhouse below, all behaved normally. She turned back.

The trees, particularly those at the top of the hill, but also the ones running up its slope, seemed to be moving. Not back and forth as in a breeze, but continuously, centripetally, like water, towards some centre, as if a great mouth were sucking them in. Blinking, she turned her head from the view, and took the last two of the Easter eggs from her bag to hide them beneath the bench.

It occurred to her, now that she thought about it, that she hadn't had a migraine in quite a while. She tried to remember when the last one had been. The best way was to think of which bed she had retired to when it came on. It must have been in Cramond, she thought. But she could not bring a memory to mind of those eggshell-blue walls pulsing sickly, or of harbouring a deeply personal hatred toward the light coming in between those cream-coloured curtains. The last one, then, could only be the one she had had on Mia's sleeper couch in Tooting.

Deciding to sit a further moment in quiet celebration of this progress, Cassie leaned back, supporting herself on her arms, and turned her face up to the sun. Then she gathered herself to return to the farmstead. But as she picked up her basket, something caught her eye.

Aloud, she said, *Sam*.

Here he was again.

It was carved into the top of the bench, on the far right, in a large hand. She rose to see if there might be any more carvings beyond her view or obscured by her rump, and saw that her parka had been covering a second name: *Frodo*.

She smiled, well pleased by something so close to a logical solution presenting itself, and of course also slightly disappointed. It was, at any rate, intriguing.

A sound behind drew her attention, and she turned, to witness another inexplicable spectacle. Behind the ruined wall she could see what was clearly the top of a human head, although if that was what it was, it's owner was taller than any human being had a right to be; at least seven feet, even given the shored up earth on the other side. But the part of the head that was visible was too small to belong to a fully grown man, let alone a giant. A moment or two later, the tandem creature came out from behind the wall, and this mystery at least was solved: it was a grown man with a small boy on his shoulders. The pair progressed up the slope towards her, in and out of sight amongst the trees. Cassie was impressed by the fact that the man – old enough to have hair of flyaway white – did not take the boy off his shoulders to make it up the steep part, merely throwing his weight forward and bending his knees a little.

'Afternoon,' he said when he was abreast of her.

'Afternoon.'

'We've not met, have we?'

'No, I'm Cassie.'

'Tom. This is my grandson, Will. I'm the groundskeeper. Are you a new one?'

'I'm just here helping today. Hello Will.'

The boy giggled into his grandfather's hair.

'What are you doing up here all alone?' said Tom.

'Hiding eggs.'

'Ah yes, of course,' said Tom. 'Nice day for it,' he added. It was, at that – there had been rumours of rain, but it seemed they had proved groundless. The sky stretched pale milky blue overhead, bare but for a single spanking white cloudmass which had split into two as she watched, the halves now scudding blindingly along the circumference of the atmosphere like a pair of new Nikes. Cassie had long ago discarded the white parka and tied it around her waist.

'Can you tell me what's over there?' said Cassie. 'Is it part of the grounds?'

'The forest? Aye, everything between here and the Penycuik line.'

She hesitated before mentioning it, worried about sounding odd, but it was so obvious to her that she felt that not remarking on it would be like stepping over a dead body in the street. 'I was wondering,' she said. 'Does it look to you as if the trees are swimming?'

'Swimming, lassie?'

'Sort of moving, upwards, towards the top of the hill.'

Tom frowned, peering at the forest. 'I can't say I know what you mean, but my eyes aren't what they used to be.'

'I can see it!' said the boy from aloft.

'There you go,' said Tom. 'Will can see it.'

'I just wondered whether it was, ah, documented at all. Whether there might be some explanation.'

'Hm,' said Tom, all his wrinkles drawing together to confer on the matter. 'Well, there's supposed to be a ghost road running through this territory. So if an oddity were to crop up, this is a good place for it.'

'A ghost road?'

'A ley line.'

'Really!'

'So they say.' He pointed towards the crest of the hill they were facing. 'There's a cat stone up there supposed to mark it.'

'A...'

'A big stone, a standin' stone.'

'Oh, a menhir?'

'Aye, one of them. Not much to look at compared to some as they have in the Highlands, Orkney, thereabouts, but it's supposed to be very old.'

'Is it Neolithic?'

'I couldn't say.'

'Is there anything else with it? A dolmen?'

'I'm not certain, lass. I've only ever seen the stone.'

'Seems an odd choice, building an astronomical device in the middle of a thick forest,' she said.

'Well, now,' said Tom. 'It is very old. I suppose there might not have been a forest then.'

'Oh. Of course,' said Cassie, feeling like an idiot. She looked across at the hill again. 'Can one walk there?' For all her inherited contempt of pseudoscience, archaeoastronomy, like graphology, had long been a guilty pleasure of hers. As a teenager she had devoured books on the subject, and had pleaded for a trip to Stonehenge when she visited her father in London.

'One could. People do. Certain people from the city like to go there. Hang about. At night.' He leaned forward as if to say something that the young boy should not hear. '*Dance*,' he said gravely.

'You mean Pagans?'

'Aye, Pagans,' he said, spitting out the 'p' as if it were a grape seed. Cassie found his tone amusing, considering that they were in the midst of preparing for a celebration of one of the thumpiest Pagan festivals of them all.

'I'd like to go and look. Is it safe?'

'It's safe enough, but the way can be tricky.'

'How does one get there?'

'There's a path,' said Tom, pointing. 'Starts at the bottom of this. It will take you over the burn. Then the path goes on until it forks round the hill. You climb up out of the fork, and there's a clearing.'

'That doesn't sound too hard,' said Cassie.

'Not too hard. I wouldn't go today, though.'

'No, not today,' she agreed. She had to be back in Edinburgh by one.

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'It's like the last episode of *Star Trek* in which Tasha Yar features, where she gets killed by the tar-pit creature,' said Justin, with unassailable conviction.

'It's not a tar-pit creature,' said Toby Carmichael.

'I know that,' said Justin. 'But that's what it looks like.'

'And it's not the last episode in which she features.'

'Yes it is,' said Justin. 'She dies.'

Cassie, her mouth full of toast, waited patiently for the meaning of this to be revealed.

At around ten 'o clock the egg-laying troops had reassembled in the Shire and migrated up to the Carmichael's kitchen. The Easter Festival was one of the few occasions on which the doings of the animal farm and the doings of the funny farm were fully integrated, and in keeping, the farmer and his wife had invited all the volunteers and staffers back to the farmhouse for a late breakfast to fortify them for the coming work.

At midday, carloads of children from all the neighbouring villages and towns, as well as Edinburgh itself, would swarm onto the grounds, and it would then be the volunteers' lot to make sure no one got lost, or suffered too much from the intense anguish that scarcity of resources would inevitably provoke.

'How,' said Cassie, 'is my thesis like that episode of *Star Trek* where Tasha Yar gets eaten by the tar-pit creature?' She had discovered by taxing trial and error that there was a sort of middle road to be followed with Justin, between full hermeneutical engagement and passive reception. The formula for dealing with his peculiar brand of diffuse intensity was to approach him as one approaches Hegel: that is, not to set out with the expectation that one is going to be able to make sense of everything right away, and to take frequent breaks. But she did feel they were drifting precariously far from the point.

'Aren't you a little old to be arguing about TV programs? They concern themselves with such nonsense, don't they, Susannah?' said Jean Carmichael, ladling out bacon and eggs.

'Pure drivel, Auntie Jean,' said Susannah happily.

'You are mistaken, you know,' said Toby. 'She comes back in series seven. In the parallel universe. The one with the Military Enterprise.'

'Toby, you are absolutely right, and I apologise,' said Justin.

'Thank you.'

'How...' said Cassie.

'The episode in which Tasha Yar gets killed by the tar-pit creature,' said Justin, 'takes place on a planet where the entire dominant race has fled, having found a way to leave all their evil behind, and

their collected sins have become embodied as this miserable, resentful, sentient mass of shiny black goo.'

'Ooh, that *is* like my thesis!' said Cassie.

'But what does it have to do with magical thinking?' said Toby.

'Because it's based on a category mistake,' said Cassie. 'As Frazer explains, it's deeply magical to suppose that evil can be *shifted* at all, like a load of stones or wood, from one place to another, or from a person into another person, or other people, or into an object, or an animal. But that's how the process has always been assumed to work. We've just made up a new ritual and dressed it up to look like modern western discourse.'

'So all you basically need is a word processor,' said Chris, who was beginning to wish he hadn't asked what exactly she would want to do with a computer.

Chris had only just arrived back on the farm; he had been down in town for a business brunch that morning, and looked incongruously urban to Cassie in the shirt sleeves and tie he was still wearing, although he had shed his shoes on the porch to save the kitchen floor. He had immediately set to talking, with the same appetite that the others had set to their meal, divesting himself of a surfeit of the type of energy which is not so much nervous as turbo-charged, all the while gripping the lower jaw of the slavering and similarly overexcited bat-eared mongrel that had come into the kitchen on his heels. He lived and worked in the city, where, Cassie had gathered, he ran a software business with a couple of pals, but he had offices up on the farm, and was here most weekends.

It was Justin who had wondered aloud whether Chris mightn't know where Cassie could get a good deal on a PC, and Chris had said he could lend her an old one free of charge.

'We've actually been thinking of branching out into hardware supply,' said Chris.

'Don't spread yourselves too thin, now,' said George Carmichael in his measured way.

'I've had a second chat with those venture capitalists I was telling you about,' said Chris to his father. 'I think they're biting.' As if to accentuate his point, the mongrel sank its teeth enthusiastically into his palm, making its curious yodelling gurgles of adoration. 'Basturt.' Chris extricated his hand, wiped it on a piece of toast, and held the toast out for the dog to take. The dog took his hand instead.

Chris held his hand over his plate to prevent his mother from restocking it.

Throughout the meal Jean Carmichael had been plying them with helpings, while eating very little herself. She had the look of the career endomorph, and like many career endomorphs, she seemed not only pleased, but driven, to derive vicarious gustatory pleasure from watching her strapping progeny, her spouse, and anyone else engulfing the food that she provided.

Cassie, due for lunch in Cramond, was sadly unable to indulge her.

Justin, though also due for lunch, did not appear to be saving himself. He put away two helpings of everything before shifting his chair back.

'There's more bacon, Justin,' said Jean Carmichael.

'I'm stuffed, thanks, Mrs. Carmichael,' said Justin with a smile.

Cassie had been interested to see how effortlessly he had effected a transformation into the kind of boy girls want to bring home to their parents.

'Now, you're a growing lad,' said Susannah, who was doing a star turn as the girl who had brought him. Her change in demeanour, not just towards Justin, but in general, continued to bother Cassie. All her brash worldliness was either gone or hidden away. Whether she had just traded one veneer for another, or whether this was closer to the heart of her, or some discarded version of herself resurrected by, or for, the company, was hard to say. Either way, she seemed to be enjoying herself, and George and Jean Carmichael clearly adored her.

'Ooh,' said Susannah, 'Justin and I saw a great big barn owl'

'They've been a plague, lately,' said George Carmichael.

All the Carmichaels, and several of the staffers, agreed that the owl population seemed to have exploded lately; they had been hearing them all over the grounds at night. 'Something must be attracting them to the farmstead,' said Martin. 'We might have rats.'

'Either that, or something's driving them out of the forest,' said Toby. 'It usually happens in the pheasant season, when the woods are full of people,' he said to Cassie.

'Poachers, perhaps,' said Susannah.

'No, that wouldn't be enough to keep them out,' said Toby.

'Well,' said their father, drumming his hands on the table. 'We'd better hurry and finish setting up, the crowds will be arriving in an hour.'

Cassie helped Jean Carmichael wash and pack away the dishes while everyone else went out to set up the tombola, the hayride, the horserides, the jumping castle, and the little market that would sell vegetables, fruit preserves, cut flowers, honey, and candles produced on the farm. Shortly before midday she sought out Justin so that they could take the shuttle down to Edinburgh. She found him with Toby Carmichael and the bat-eared dog, gambolling – there was no other word for it – on the lawn outside the schoolhouse. All three of them were covered in grass.

'We'd better get going,' said Cassie.

'Going,' stated Justin. It was his customary way of asking for more information.

'Lunch. Cramond.'

'I'm going to stick around up here and help with the kids, rather,' said Justin.

'Aren't you expected?' said Cassie.

'I told my mom I may or may not come.'

'Oh,' said Cassie. 'Okay.'

'See you at Hill Cottage tonight then?'

'I think I'll stay down there. Get some work done.' She knew there was a party on at Hill Cottage after the open-day event had ended, and had anticipated returning with Justin that evening, but she

was mildly annoyed that he was leaving her to face public transport and their family alone, and did not relish the thought of making the trip back up after dark.

'As you will. I'll be down tomorrow for work,' said Justin, either calling or missing her bluff.

'Tomorrow?'

'Susie and I are staying the night up here.'

'Up here? Why?' said Cassie.

'Because, we'll end late,' said Justin.

'But you have Susannah's car,' said Cassie, thinking he meant they would end after the last shuttle had gone.

'He's trying to say he intends to get rat-arsed,' said Toby Carmichael, grinning.

'Oh,' said Cassie. 'Well. See you at work, then.'

However, once lunch was finished, Cassie found herself listless, and wondering what they were doing, and if it was fun. Eventually she gave up on bowing out, got dressed, and, begging a lift into Edinburgh from Lynn, she made her way to one of the handful of bus-stops scattered across the city where the shuttle that went by the farm was likely to put in an appearance.

By seven she was wending her way back into cow country and sheep country and through villages of ever diminishing proportions, until the shuttle had ventured beyond the last glimmer of electric light. She was a little apprehensive about identifying the correct place to get off. At the best of times the Kilgreay stop was distinguishable from the surrounding wilderness only by the presence of a single weather-beaten bench and a pole with a schedule on it, and that, she knew from her last night time visit, would now be swallowed by darkness, along with everything else.

Once she had disembarked, and the shuttle had departed, taking its headlights with it, she had hoped to rely on a combination of memory, echolocation and dumb luck to identify the correct turnoff from the Kilgreay Road, and thence down the last blind mile to Hill Cottage.

Things had, for a while, seemed to go according to plan, but Cassie was no longer at all certain she had taken the right road, or even gotten off at the right stop. There were trees to the right and a field to the left, as she remembered the Kilgreay Road having, but might they not be other trees, another field?

She had been walking for what felt like a lot longer than she should have been, when she became convinced that she was not alone on the road. She decided to phone Justin and ask him to come and meet her with the car. She got voicemail. Of course, there was no reception. Cassie was annoyed, but she could think of no useful way to describe where she was anyway. And so what if someone was following her?

She paused in her tracks to listen. Yes, someone was following her.

Which was, in itself, a very negative and also self-centred way of looking at things, she told herself. It was more than likely that whoever was behind her on the road was just headed to the same destination.

She started walking again, stopped. Listened. There were definitely footsteps.

But that's a *good* thing, she told herself. This isn't Cape Town. Woods don't mean *bergies* here. Woods don't mean hijackers. The night noises here are safe noises.

Justin had given her the Hill Cottage landline number in case of an emergency, and now she phoned that. After twenty rings someone answered, and she asked for him. She was holding the line, simultaneously attempting to convince herself that her fears were ludicrous, and berating herself for having come in the first place, when something approached swift and low from ahead and barrelled powerfully into her thigh, landing her on her backside in the dirt and knocking the phone from her hand and the air from her lungs before thundering forth on its unfathomable flocculent quest.

'Hoop!'

She sat up in the dirt, winded, sore, but laughing soundlessly for all that. A sheep. A stupid sheep.

'Hello?' she heard from the bracken on the verge, like the voice of a kibold. She scrabbled for her phone.

'Justin,' she coughed.

'You all right?'

'I'm fine.'

Except that the sheep, as far as she could tell, had come from in front, and her sense of being followed had come, logically enough, from behind.

Also, it could not be denied, something had said 'hoop.'

'Are you sure?' There was a lot of noise from his end. Cassie recognised Susannah's hard, glossy voice in the background. 'What's going on?'

'I'm on my way to you.'

'I thought you were staying home.'

'Yes. No. Changed my mind. Justin, there's someone behind me.'

'Speak up?'

'No. He'll hear.'

Cassie ceased gasping, breathing through her nose to make less noise, and strained to hear.

Hoop, thought Cassie. With a hoop hoop here and a hoop hoop there. No breed of sheep went 'hoop.' Not a single farm animal she could think of made that noise. It had been a human voice. A man's.

'Where are you, exactly?' said Justin.

'I'm not sure. One of the dirt roads.'

'On the grounds?'

'Yes.'



'Oh, well, then you're all right, aren't you?'

'Am I?'

'It will just be one of us. Which road are you on?'

'I'm not sure. I'm lost.'

'Well, what do you see?'

Cassie peered. 'I, ah. Jesus.'

Even though she knew this particular dark road was frequented by very few besides those who resided or worked on the farm, Cassie had been unable to still the knee-jerk reaction to of the urbanite to being followed by an unidentified male down a dark road. But with the unexpected appearance of a primordial foe, she decided that freezing in her tracks was after all the appropriate reaction. If it was liable to chase her, running would do no good, and she doubted she would get very far anyway in this light before knocking herself out by tripping over a tree root or another sheep. For what separated itself from the darkness and moved towards her with unhurried deliberation was a very large canine animal with stiff triangular ears and soundless feet.

'Cassie?' said Justin.

She was trying to remember if it was a cougar you were supposed to run from and a bear you were supposed to play dead in front of, or a bear you ran from and a cougar you played dead, and what, if anything, one did about wolves, and thought that perhaps one climbed a tree, when someone said hello. Her immediate impression was that it was the animal itself that had spoken, but for the sake of sanity she addressed her answer to the generalised darkness behind it. 'Hello?' she said, and to Justin she hissed: 'He's got a wolf.'

'He's got a *what*?'

The animal came to a halt and glanced back in the direction of the motorway with an air of expectancy. It was ghost-white in colour, and the only thing she could see.

'Hello?' said Cassie. 'Someone there?'

'Aye,' came the answer from the darkness, some ten feet further down.

'Who is it?' said Justin.

'I don't know yet,' said Cassie. '*Who* is there?' she said to the darkness.

'Amos.'

'He says it's Amos,' said Cassie, into the phone.

'Amos?' said Justin. 'Amos who?'

'Amos who?' said Cassie

'A mosquito bit me,' said the disembodied voice. Cassie laughed her choking-on-a-fishbone-laugh.

'Cassie!' said Justin. 'Are you all right? What's going on?'

'I was laughing.' She had by now convinced herself that there was nothing to fear from a jocular Scotsman on the Kilgrey road, even in the dead of night, even with a wolf.

'It sounded like you were choking.'

'I've got one for you,' said the voice. 'What have I got in my pocket?'

'What kind of a question is that?' said Cassie, once again growing alarmed.

'What's going on?' said Justin.

'He's got something in his pocket.'

'What?'

'I don't know. He asked me.'

'He asked you to do what?'

'No, the – man – asked me what he's got in his pocket.'

'I'm not following. Oh. Wait. Lucas!' said Justin.

'What?'

'It has to be. Bilbo Baggins, you see?'

'Lucas Carmichael?' Cassie asked Justin.

'Aye,' said the voice in the darkness. 'Do I know you?'

'Give me – give him – let me speak to him. Actually, scratch that. Don't tell him I'm here, okay?'

'Ah...'

'Just don't tell him. Don't tell him.'

'Justin?'

'Shh! I'll see you in a moment. You'll be safe with him.' Justin hung up. Cassie felt abruptly abandoned, but no longer terrified.

'Are there two of you, there?' said Lucas Carmichael, who was by now visible as a moving thing in contrast to the still thing around him which was the night.

'No,' said Cassie. 'Just one. I was on the phone. Did you say 'hoop'?'

'I may have.'

'Oh,' said Cassie. 'Why?'

'Seemed like a good idea at the time.' A pause, breathing and gravel scuffing. A misshapen figure was looming into view. When he spoke again, he was a good deal nearer. 'I was the victim of a run-by sheeping.'

The Hound of the Baskervilles was standing at a point midway between them as if waiting to introduce them to each other. 'So you're Lucas?' said Cassie.

'I am. Have we met?'

'No. I'm Cassie.'

'Delighted.'

'Is your, ah, wolf... dangerous?' she said.

The man chuckled gruffly. 'Don't mind him. He wouldn't harm a fly.' He emerged into view, which meant less than two metres in front of her, and she greeted him with an invisible smile. She realised that the bulky shape he cut out of the night was the result of a large load he carried on his back, like a haversack.

He reached the dog as he said this – it was a dog, of course – and it turned and bumped its nose against his hand.

'What breed is it?' said Cassie.

'He's a German Shepherd.'

'I've never seen a white one before,' said Cassie.

'Are you trying to get to the residences?' said Lucas.

'Aye, I mean, yes. I'm trying to. I'm a bit lost, to be honest. I can't see a thing. I think I took a wrong turn. You haven't got a torch, have you?'

'I don't need one. Here,' She heard more than saw him shifting his load from one shoulder to the other, and then a ribbon of pale yellow folded back on itself about a foot away from her. She realised she was looking at a reflective strip such as one finds running down the sleeve of certain jackets. He was offering his arm. 'You've taken the turnoff for the farmhouse, but you can get where you're wanting to go this way. I'll walk with you.'

She hooked her hand into the crook of his offered elbow, and they set off again.

'Thanks. These roads are a nightmare in the dark.'

'Glad to be of service.' They walked on a while, the big white dog keeping a constant distance three or four feet ahead.

She thought she knew where they were now, beside the pasture. Cassie recognised it only by the impression of large warm shapes shifting fustily behind the fence and the muffled crunch of cud. 'How can you see?' she asked her guide. He walked easily, at almost a daylight pace, and she suspected he was slowing himself to less than this only for her sake.

'I can't,' said Lucas. 'But I know this road very well. Are you visiting here, or working?'

'Visiting. Just overnight. There's a party.'

'Of course there is,' said Lucas. 'Which house?'

'Hill Cottage.'

As they entered the circle of light around the buildings, and Cassie looked Lucas full in the face, she realised two things simultaneously. Firstly, that she had just experienced the expression 'the blind leading the blind' made laughably literal, and secondly, that she had, in fact, seen a dog like his somewhere before. The two facts banged away in her head before dovetailing to provide the information she was searching for.

'I was on the train with you,' she said.

'The train?'

'When I arrived in Edinburgh. It would be two months ago now. It was you, I'm sure of it... It was raining...'

'Hmm.'

'You had an argument with the ticket lady...'

'Ah,' said Lucas. 'I think I do remember. Worst train trip of my life. First I got soaked, then there was that phone business, then I fell asleep and missed my stop. And then – You were there?'

'I woke you.'

'You woke me?'

'It was me who woke you.'

'You?'

'Me.'

'I thought it was another ticket-lady.'

'No.'

'Thank you.'

'You're welcome. Where were you supposed to go?'

'Durham.'

'Were you working there?'

'No. I work in London. I was visiting someone in Durham.'

'Oh,' said Cassie. 'Girlfriend?'

'Old friend,' said Lucas. 'Old teacher of mine, actually. He's not been too well.'

'I'm sorry to hear it,' said Cassie. Lucas nodded.

'Did you just come from there?' said Cassie.

'No. I've come from London. The RCM.'

'The RCM?'

'The Royal College of Music.'

'I know what it stands for.'

There was a pause, during which Cassie felt horrendous for the curt rejoinder, and unsure how to address the situation, and unnerved by the name, Royal College of Music. She was saved a decision by the white dog, which pricked its ears and barked once. It was the first sound of any kind that it had thus far uttered: decisive, considered; a crisis management bark. Immediately there was an answering yodel that she had heard before. 'The welcoming committee,' said Lucas, smiling broadly. He put two fingers in his mouth and whistled, the first gesture he had yet made that marked him, to Cassie's eyes, as his brothers' brother.

Immediately a frenzy of barking erupted from up the road, the yodelling voice now joined by two others, further away but coming nearer. She heard the approach of pelting feet and steeled herself. The bat-eared dog was first to arrive, followed shortly by a terrier of some description and a huge, block-headed animal that looked like one its parents might have been a Panzer and the other a mop.

'Dogs!' said Lucas. He went down on his knees to accept their noisy oblations of fur and saliva. 'Have you been introduced?' he said to Cassie.

'Ah, not formally, no,' said Cassie. She recognised them, had seen them stretched out in puddles of sunshine, but had never thought to wonder if they had names, let alone suspected that any human being would greet them as if they were his family. For her part, Cassie was mostly trying to avoid the mud.

'You don't like dogs?' said Lucas.

'Does it show?' said Cassie, wondering how he had picked it up.

He smiled. 'The shepherd cross is Banshee,' he said, indicating the first, which was still abasing itself before him enthusiastically. 'The little one is Matilda, and that's Brock.' He gestured towards the third, who was exchanging a more dignified, man-to-man sort of greeting with the white dog. 'Oh, and this old fellow is Cole,' said Lucas, scratching the white dog between the ears.

'Coal?' said Cassie dubiously, patting a random dusty back. 'You named your dog Coal?'

'It's C-O-L-E, like Nat King.'

'But that's no better. It means 'black,' doesn't it? In Old English.'

Lucas frowned. 'And?' he said.

'He's...' she paused, uncertain, and then certain, that he was teasing her. 'He's white,' she said.

'Good God, is he really?' said Lucas. 'How very embarrassing.' Cassie wondered if his reaction was sarcasm thinly disguised as humour, the same as hers when people pointed out that her eyes were different colours, and then decided that it wasn't the same thing at all, because nobody was *forced* to give the dog a confusing name, and besides, she could see Lucas was enjoying himself. He relented after a moment. 'The man who named him has an odd sense of humour.'

'Is he a favourite of yours?' said Cassie.

'One of many.'

He told her the old bit about Nat Cole being ordered to stand up and sing in a Chicago club by a mafia don, despite his protestations that he only played piano. The mafioso was not accustomed to taking no for an answer, and the rest, of course, was history. She had heard it before, but he told it so well and with such enjoyment that she pretended she hadn't. From his lips it was not a story, but a yarn.

'Well, it was nice to meet you, ah, all,' she said. 'I'm all right from here.' They were in view of the schoolhouse. 'Unless... are you joining us for the party?'

'I'll see you to the hill,' said Lucas.

They went on walking towards Hill Cottage with Lucas's slavering entourage in tow. During the short journey, Cassie reassessed her earlier judgement: he did look something like his brothers – there was that inner and outer sturdiness – but his colouring was different. Toby and Chris were harvest colours, like their father. Lucas looked like a seashore in winter. 'Have you found it?' said Lucas.

'Pardon?'

'Whatever you're looking for in my ear. Have you found it yet?'

Cassie was glad for the darkness. 'I didn't mean to stare,' she said. 'I was just thinking... your brothers look more like each other than like you.'

He smiled. 'How did you recognise me, by the way?' Cassie was in the midst of thinking of an answer that wouldn't blow Justin's surprise, when Rex blew it for him.

'Oi!' he shouted from the kitchen porch. 'Lucas, ye ugly bastard!' Lucas shouted back a similar endearment and they greeted one another. 'Well met,' said Lucas. 'And can I take it that -'

'Late,' came a second voice, 'is the *hour* in which this *conjurer* chooses to appear.'

Lucas smiled to hear Justin's voice emanating from the entrance to Hill Cottage. 'What goes up, must come down,' he said whimsically, to himself, or Cassie, she couldn't be sure.

Justin came down to the parking lot, and engaged Lucas in a sort of gentle tackle, head-first, which Cassie found very touching, somehow more so because Lucas and Rex had merely shaken hands.

Then Susannah stepped out. She stopped in the kitchen doorway with her hand on the doorframe and looked at Lucas, her heart-shaped face very pale. She said his name.

Lucas turned his head away from her and said, very quietly, 'Hello, Susie.'

She approached him, and after a moment's pause, embraced him, and he said something to her in a low voice. Cassie formed an opinion. Friends do not hug for that long, even upon re-uniting, she thought. Friends do not sink their heads towards each other's shoulders that way, and have tears standing in their eyes when they part, as Susannah did now.

'Well,' said Lucas. 'We all have some catching up to do.'

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There is a kind of loathing that the chronically sleepless feel for the nearby sleeping.

In boarding school, and on holidays with the extended family, surrounded by entire roomfuls of smug melatonin factories, it had always seemed to Cassie that she was being ganged up on. The soft snores might as well have been sniggers, the loud ones bald jeers, the small shifts and sighs so much whispered gossip.

When, as now, she could not participate, Cassie was a keen observer.

Sam had slept obnoxiously, ostentatiously, and – circumstances permitting – for exactly nine hours at a stretch. He would fall asleep, if she let him, as soon as his head hit the pillow, and after nine hours he would roll over onto his stomach and begin to awaken from the feet up.

As she watched him, which she did often, especially in the first year, and again in the last, Cassie had many times had occasion to think of Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that a woman awake while her lover slept was impatient for him to regain consciousness, not because she was lonely, but because she required the confirmation of her existence provided by his active perception of her.

All this proved, as far as Cassie was concerned, was that Simone de Beauvoir was an insomniac.

Justin existed on very little sleep in general, but only because he was better at it than most. 'I'm an efficient sleeper,' he had once told her. Watching him now, and listening to the awesome steadiness of his breaths, Cassie believed it. He slept with commitment and gusto, his face furious, a shoulder or leg twitching occasionally, like a farm animal shedding flies.

They were both in the Hill Cottage common room, Cassie on the couch, Justin in a sleeping bag on the floor. Justin had, as Toby predicted, become rat-arsed at the party, as had enough of the other guests that the spare rooms had all been taken. Cassie herself had not thought to bring a sleeping bag, and although she had borrowed a duvet from Aaltje, she was still so cold that she slept in her parka. Or tried to.

Kilgrey staffers from all four of the houses had joined them that night for a drink or ten. The hangover that had followed New Years' Eve still fresh in her memory, Cassie had not indulged overmuch, despite concerted efforts to sway her resolve on the part of Rex, Justin, Aaltje, Martin, and not least, a Sycamore House staffer from Bratislava by the name of Nick, who had spent much of the evening whispering lascivious invitations in her ear with a macabre, nihilistic jollity that seemed to spring largely from a growing awareness of how unlikely she was to take him up on them.

Surrounded by Scots, Eastern Europeans, Balkaners, and others who never said no if they could help it, Cassie had resigned herself to making as much as possible of that lonely privilege of the abstemious: the opportunity to watch everyone else making arses of themselves.

She had nevertheless put away a fair amount of cider over the hours, and now discovered that she needed the bathroom again. She rose from the couch, slipped on her shoes against the memory of the bare tiles in the passage, and went through the kitchen.

She had at last obtained egress from Nick's conversation when he plunged headlong into someone else's gentle discourse on the lovely, unseasonable weather they had had that day, which he quickly commandeered with a vehement diatribe about global warming, while the conversation's originators, both volunteer practicants, sat stunned and meek before his passion. Cassie, glad to be free of his attentions, had escaped to join Justin's crowd at the other end of the room.

'What are you drinking?' Lucas had asked her.

'I'm not,' said Cassie.

'Surely you jest.'

'Ah, a Crossbow then,' said Cassie.

'Pass the lass a Crossbow, Lion-O, she's dying of thirst,' Lucas had said to Justin.

'Lion-O?' said Cassie, smiling. 'Someone has to explain this to me.'

'Our first band in uni was called Thunderbrats,' said Rex.

Cassie blinked ignorantly.

'As in, *Thundercats*?' said Justin with heavy overemphasis. He passed her an opened Crossbow.

'Oh yes. I don't know that show too well,' said Cassie.

There was an uncomfortable silence. Rex cleared his throat.

'What?' said Cassie. 'I never watched cartoons much.'

'You never saw *Thundercats*?' said Justin, for the first time truly unmanned by her ignorance. It was bad enough that she had not seen *Blade Runner*, had just barely seen *Star Wars*, and that she should manage to maintain so dim a grasp of *Star Trek* and *Twin Peaks* that she would be hard pressed to so much as correctly identify their theme tunes. But that she had not seen *Thundercats*, well, that was like not having learned to read, and he looked at her as if it were a miracle that she had survived childhood at all.

'I have *heard* of it,' said Cassie, defensively. 'Look. There's something I think I'd better mention. I wasn't allowed to watch much TV when I was growing up. My father, you may have noticed, abhors it.' There was presently no TV in the Harris household.

'Well,' said Justin, with an air of letting her off the hook. 'All right. In *Thundercats*, Lynx-O was visually impaired, you see.'

'It's a cartoon, Justin, for God's sake. You can say "blind,"' said Lucas.

'...and Lion-O -'

'Had the mind of a twelve year old trapped in a twenty-two year-old's body,' Lucas finished for him.



'- was the leader of the group,' Justin said loudly. 'Then there's Panthera, the buff one, who was Bruce, and Tigra, the gay one, who was - '

'He is not gay! He is not gay!' said Rex. 'That was the product of a smear campaign. He is sensitive and intelligent.'

'And *tidy*,' said Lucas.

'Shut yer gob.'

'- and then Susie was Cheetarah,' said Justin.

Of the Thunderbrats' nine month alliance, there lived to tell the tale eighty minutes of mono and an amateur music video showing Justin sporting the Lion-O hairdo, all of which had been suppressed.

'You looked good in a leotard, Suse,' said Rex.

Cassie had expected Susannah to come back with a snappy rejoinder, but she merely laughed modestly.

Susannah had provided the most interesting viewing that evening. Once Lucas arrived, she had hardly left his side, nor spared Justin a single overly affectionate comment or gesture of the type she had lavished upon him all that day.

Justin did not seem to notice, or if he noticed, he did not care, or if he cared, he did not show it. He and Lucas had spent a half hour deep in conversation before Toby Carmichael arrived, greeted his brother voluminously, then berated him roundly, first for having hitched up from Edinburgh when any one of them would have fetched him, and then for not having come to the farmhouse to greet his parents before they went to bed, and finally for not yet having poured him a drink. Lucas had retired not long after, although Toby stayed well into the night.

Just before Lucas had said his goodbyes that evening, Cassie, on her way through to the bathroom, had found them standing in the kitchen together, Lucas and Susannah, and she had inadvertently overheard the end of what had clearly been a difficult conversation.

'As I said, I don't think it's necessary, Luke,' she had heard Susannah saying.

'I am concerned that you might change your mind about that when it's too late.'

'I have considered that too. Really, I've thought about it.'

They had then stood for what seemed a very long time, Susannah looking Lucas intensely in the face, her arms folded across her chest, Lucas not looking at her, but his body language, his will, converging on her.

It was such a long silence that Cassie wondered whether they might in fact be speaking inaudibly. Or telepathically. Just as she was making up her mind to enter the kitchen, or clear her throat, or find

some other route to the bathroom, Lucas nodded, and Susannah turned for the door. Seeing Cassie, she had stopped abruptly, giving her a look, on the inquiring side of accusation, but only by a hair's breadth. Cassie met it and smiled. She had stood *in* the doorway as they spoke, in full view, waiting only out of politeness. Her conscience was satisfied.

'Goodnight, Cassie,' Susannah had said pointedly, and, over her shoulder: 'See you at the farmhouse, Luke.' It was intended, Cassie had no doubt, only for her. Susannah had wanted to make absolutely sure that Cassie knew she had a bed waiting for her at the farmhouse; no mere couch in a common room.

The pettiness of it made a jarring contrast with what had gone before. What had struck Cassie more than anything else about the conversation she had overheard was the evident comity between them, and the careful way in which every word was spoken, as if they were deposing each other.

Cassie entered the bathroom with a little trepidation – Nick had warned her on her first trip there that Cameron 'sometime smear his shit on the wall' at night – but found it still in good working order. The water that came out of the taps was so cold that her fingers went numb.

She stumbled her way back along the passage that housed the bedrooms of the male residents, their doors open, closed, or ajar, and the lights inside on or off, in accordance with their individual proclivities.

Coming back through the kitchen, Cassie noticed movement out in the blackness of the Shire, and stopped by the window to look.

It was the white German Shepherd, whipping across the dark lawn like a flag torn loose. Cassie moved to the other window to see where it was going, and saw Lucas standing by the moor fence, his hands in his jacket pockets, his head bowed, and Gandalf before him.

Glad to discover a sleepless companion, she decided to go out and say hello. She stepped out through the kitchen door, making sure to leave the latch off, and crossed the bridge towards them.

First dog and then master turned their heads at the sound.

'Evening,' said Cassie.

Lucas smiled and returned the greeting. Cassie wondered if she should say, it's Cassie, as she would if it were a phone conversation.

'You're up late,' said Lucas.

'I can't get to sleep.' She emphasised her accent just in case he still needed clues. 'Noisy head.'

'I know what you mean,' said Lucas. 'I'm in the same boat. I thought I'd come for a walk and reacquaint myself with the place. This air will knock the noise out of any head.'

It was past midnight and below zero. Their breaths misted thickly, and their voices seemed amplified. She patted Cole. 'I didn't recognise him without his jacket, earlier,' she said. 'When you two

were on the train, he had a guide dog jacket on.' She had little doubt any more that he knew who she was, but she wanted to recall their earlier encounter again for the sake of familiarity. She had not had much chance to speak to him, inside.

'Ah, yes,' said Lucas. 'I put that on him when we're in the city. But he's not really a guide dog.'

'He isn't?' Cassie would have been only a little surprised if he had gone on to tell her that he was not really blind.

She had been baffled several times that night by his profoundly unimpaired behaviour. When Toby, with nothing more than a cursory 'Luke,' for a warning, had tossed a bottle-opener clear across the room, and Lucas had caught it backhand, while staring, to all appearances, at the opposite wall, she had given up on trying to figure it out.

'He was supposed to be one, but he proved too aloof,' said Lucas. 'Poor bugger had a confusing time of it in his puppyhood. He was bred for police work, and for that he turned out to be too docile. So the police passed him over to the guide dog training institute in Farfor. By that stage the police training had ruined him for people-work. So I said I would take him.'

'Hmm,' said Cassie. 'Is he happy to be home?'

Lucas smiled. 'He's very happy.'

There was an odd, loud deadness in the spaces between sentences, which Cassie identified, after a moment's reflection, as an absence of white noise. Such sounds as there were carried – she could hear the occasional sheep bleating in the pasture far away with disorienting clarity, and the chuckle of the burn was like a kettle boiling within arms' reach.

'Were you studying?' she asked. 'At the RCM.'

'I was,' said Lucas. 'But I finished last June. They awarded me a junior fellowship, so I've been doing that.'

'Really?' said Cassie. 'Teaching piano?'

'Music history, mostly.'

She wouldn't normally have said it, but she still felt bad about the way she had inadvertently closed the topic earlier, and she was intrigued by the thought that they would have met that year; he and Sam, that they might, conceivably, have been friends. 'My boyfriend was going to do a Masters there,' Cassie said. 'He won a scholarship.'

'He missed out, then,' said Lucas. 'It's a lovely school. What did he do instead?'

'He passed away.'

Lucas fell silent, and Cassie reprimanded herself once again. And yet, she thought, not too long ago, she would have made a point of saying 'he was murdered.'

There was no reward in it, anymore. Not with this audience, at least. She was uneasy in the thought that there ever had been a reward.

Lucas was scratching the pale convex plane of Gandalf's cheek. The horse's head nodded down between them, obscuring his face from view.

'You mean *that* boyfriend,' he said at last.

'You know about him?' said Cassie.

'Not much. Justin told us when it happened. I never knew he was a musician.'

Cassie nodded, then said 'yes' out loud.

'What was his instrument?'

'Also piano.'

They both fell still again. The general silence made silences seem longer as well as louder. Cassie began stroking the other side of Gandalf's face. He laid a dark eye on her and blew.

She wondered if she should start talking about something else, to let Lucas off the hook. No-one ever knew what to say at this point in these conversations. Usually they fell back on 'I'm sorry,' or offered her advice if they were old enough, or empathy if they had it to hand.

Instead, Lucas said: 'Does it get easier?'

Cassie nodded. 'It does, with time.'

Lucas sighed. 'That's good,' he said simply.

Wearied of their attentions, the horse swayed away like a ghost-ship and began cropping grass. Cassie folded her arms across herself. The four syllables she had just spoken seemed to shimmer solidly, written in the cloud of breath that had carried them from her body.

'Well. I'll be turning in, if you don't mind,' said Lucas. 'They'll have me up with the cows, no doubt, just in case I think I'm too good for it now.' He patted the horse's flank. 'Goodnight, old man.'

'Goodnight,' said Cassie.

'Goodnight, Cassandra.'

'Cassiopeia,' she said, apologetically.

'My word, that's a mouthful,' said Lucas. 'Do you have a second name?'

'No, thank God. Do you?'

'Ah,' said Lucas, with a tone that he had set a trap for himself. 'I do.'

'And what is it?'

'Lucas.'

'Your second name is Lucas?'

'Aye.'

'Your name is Lucas Lucas Carmichael?' said Cassie.

'No. My name is George Lucas Carmichael.'

'George...Lucas.'

'You are welcome to laugh.'

'Why don't you go by George?'

'Because my father's name is George. It became confusing, and differentiating by calling me 'Boy George' was only funny the first thousand times.'

She was not sure if he was joking, but she laughed, as bidden. He nodded goodnight once more, said 'we'll see each other soon,' and then she watched as he turned and left her, slowly down the hill, the white dog overtaking him to walk in front.

They left her standing there, the leftover smile slowly fading, to make a first pass at understanding what had just happened, what she had just said, how it was possible.

*It does, with time.*

The conviction in her voice! Where had it come from? Had she meant it? She had meant it. When did this happen? She would have to think about it.

It had, in fact, become easier. When she probed for that sorrow, tested it as one tests an injured muscle, she found it no longer raw. But the long history of incremental healing, and the intimation of reflection on that process, these in her tone had been equally unfounded. She had only just realised that it had become easier. Briefly she wondered if it had only just become easier, at that moment, as he asked the question and she spoke the words. Could such a thing pass unnoticed, uncelebrated, unmourned, as that state, that constant weight, that shadow? She would have to think.

## Full Pink Moon

Early April yielded a further clutch of prematurely warm days, less pleasant than they might have been because they seemed unnatural, uncomfortable in their skins, as if the city was suffering from a low-grade fever. As though to illustrate, a flu was making its rounds. Cassie and Justin both had the bug, but Justin carried on regardless, while Cassie called in sick, inverting the stereotype.

She was bad at flu, especially this stage, and especially in good weather: well enough to feel time was being wasted indoors, not well enough to go out.

For some reason it was this housebound week that made Cassie acknowledge that Edinburgh had become at least some kind of a home to her. Taking to her bed with tissues and aspirin and vitamin C without feeling that she was in the wrong place, surrounded by the wrong people, served as a buttering of the paws. It was, for instance, on one of these irritable, flushed afternoons that Cassie finally admitted to herself that she had no intention of returning to London.

It also made her realise she was isolated.

While Justin was living in Cramond, people had popped in. And Justin had gone out, and Cassie had gone with him. Now that Justin was not there, no one popped in to see them; to see him. And the only person she went out to see, specifically, was Justin. It had been easy to ignore while she was working in the pub during the days and going to Marchmont in the evenings; she saw everyone as a matter of course.

Now she was sick, and no one came to visit her. Not even Justin. One good thing had come of her solitude: she was working again.

Keyboard in her lap, screen on a desk to the left, the digital voice she had dubbed Stephen Hawking Jr. reading her words back to her, she sat in bed and sifted through her ideas. She could touch-type, and quite enjoyed listening to the words rather than reading them. The soothingly cosmic, infinitely reasonable tone of the synthesizer lent her tentative arguments the unassailable aura of long-established scientific fact.

*Frazer notes that a key element of the catharsis ritual is the fantasy that the pharmakoi offer themselves for the task; that they willingly take upon themselves the burden of the community's evil, and the concomitant fate, said Stephen Hawking Junior reasonably. This criterion is aptly fulfilled by the nature of the amnesty application procedure.*

*Another key element of the catharsis ritual, however, is that the pharmakoi are ceremonially sacrificed. It is for this reason that I have identified amnesty itself as the pharmakon: medicine on the face of it, but also, perhaps, a slow-acting poison.*

'Don't overdo the galavanting this weekend. I hope you've upped your fluid intake... No, love, beer does *not* count.'

Cassie was listening to her work with one ear and listening to Lynn with the other. Her step-mother, on the phone to Justin, was asking if he thought he would be well enough to come round for Sunday lunch the day after tomorrow. Cassie pricked up her ears.

'Oh, good,' said Lynn.

Cassie smiled.

The computer she was working on now had been obtained a week earlier, the morning after the Easter party at Kilgrey. It was an old one of Lucas's, hence the voice software.

Waking up that Monday morning in Hill Cottage, she had found Justin shaking her by the shoulder, looking pink-eyed and irritable.

'Chris wants you,' he said. 'At the farmhouse.'

'Chris?' mumbled Cassie. 'What for?'

'I don't bloody know, but it's six a.m. and I answered the phone, so you'd better go and find out what for and it had better be a fantastic reason.' With that he tumbled noisily back into his sleeping bag.

Cassie had risen, pulled her shoes on, and after rinsing her mouth out in the kitchen, she had tottered down the Kilgrey Road towards the farmhouse. Dawn was not quite upon them, and she blew on her hands as she went. The dogs barked at her when she tramped through the long grass towards the farmhouse.

Jean Carmichael, who, it appeared, had already been awake long enough to dismember half a sheep, which lay in glistening cuts before her on a broad table outside, directed her round the back.

She found Chris in the converted outbuilding that served him for offices. He was on the phone when she entered, talking rapidfire techie. He winked at her in lieu of a good morning, and she waited while he finished his conversation.

'Look what I have for you,' he said when he had put the phone down. He bent beneath his desk and emerged, looking pleased with himself, with a computer in his arms. 'I can get you a monitor for it too. It's an old machine, but it will do for what you need.'

'Oh, thanks!' said Cassie, who had forgotten all about it. 'That's great. When do you need it back?'

'It's Luke's, my brother's, so we'll have to ask, but I'm sure you can have it as long as you like,' said Chris, putting it on the desk. Then he leaned back in his chair, folded his arms behind his head, and, looking over her shoulder, said, 'Well, well, well. Speak of the devil.'

Cassie turned to see Lucas in the doorway.

A brief and violent wrestling match between the brothers ensued, which, Cassie gathered by degrees, signified nothing more alarming than the fact that they had not yet seen each other since Lucas's return.

She had watched, unsure whether she was expected to join in, intervene, cheer, or simply wait, while Lucas manoeuvred himself out of an arm-lock and Chris into a head-lock. As he did so, he explained in a gentle, reassuring tone, that no matter what Christopher did, or how rich he became, or how many pounds he could bench, he, Lucas, would always, always be two and a half years older.

'What's this thesis of yours about?' Lucas said, once Chris had obtained his freedom and permission to lend Cassie the computer.

'Don't ask,' said Chris. 'You'll be sorry.'

Cassie had explained, as succinctly as she was able, that she had set out to demonstrate the essentially magical character of the assumptions that lay behind the precepts of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

She had started with Aristotle's description of the dramaturgical function of catharsis – *katarsis* – as the desired effect of a tragedy for the stage; the *ekstasis* that is ideally felt by the audience upon recognising that the woes of the characters are not their own, and that there is a moral to be drawn from this: be thankful.

'I'm arguing that this element of spectacle is pivotal to the way the Commission is supposed to work,' she said. 'The individual stories, the voices, the names, take generalised, unindividuated suffering and turn them into the narrative elements of the 'play.' But with a twist: the healing process, the *katarsis*, is supposed to be reciprocal.'

'Between victim and perpetrator,' said Lucas, who was wishing fervently that he had fetched a cup of coffee before asking.

'No: between the individual and the public. Between player and audience. The idea behind individual catharsis is that evil, or pain, or malaise, can be *dispersed*. Transferred from the one to the many, through ceremonial magic. Ritual. Almost as if every audience member absorbs a bit of it; as if the burden of suffering, and the burden of culpability, is spread around. At the same time, there is collective catharsis, which works inversely: the burden, the evil, of the whole society, is transferred from the many to the one. Or the few. An entire history of generalised suffering is attached to a manageable, conceivable set of faces, names, stories. In a sense, not only the plaintiffs, but the accused, are actually our mascots.'



'So your thesis is about what a relief it is to get everything out in the open,' said Lucas. 'Is that about the size of it?'

'No.'

'Oh.'

'That's what it *should* be about. That's what I intended it to be about. But it started being about something else.'

'And what's that?'

Cassie took a deep breath. 'Goats.'

'I warned you,' said Chris to Lucas.

'Goats, you say,' said Lucas, smiling.

'Yep. Two of them.'

'What are their names?'

'That,' Cassie had said, 'is what I am trying to figure out.'

When Chris had revealed the PC, Cassie's first reaction, in truth, had been disappointment. First she thought it was just because it would make it harder to find excuses not to work if she wasn't limited to Justin's computer. Now she realised that it was mostly because it would be harder to find excuses to go to Marchmont.

You have to start branching out, she told herself. When she got better, she resolved, she would make a point of phoning up Aaltje and asking if she wanted to go and see a movie at the Cameo. She would say, no one else around here seems to appreciate art. And hope that Aaltje did not think she was being asked out on a date.

'Lu-cas!' Lynn was saying to Justin. 'Is he back in the fold? What is he up to these days?... oh! Really! Well you must pass on our congratulations. In fact, won't you ask him if he wants to join us?'

Cassie smiled again.

When Lucas and Justin arrived for lunch that Sunday, Cassie was amused to see that of the two of them, it was Justin who was more awkward in the kitchen.

She was also interested to note that the Doctors Harris treated Lucas with an abundance of affection and respect of the type that had always been bestowed from all quarters on Cassie's insufferably accomplished cousin, Perfect Sean. Lucas took it very much in his stride, but Cassie thought she detected in Justin, from time to time, a hint of the long-suffering knowledge of his comparatively mortal status to which she and Sean's sister Lindl had always been obliged to resign themselves.

'Congratulations on your appointment, my word!' Lynn said, kissing him hello on both cheeks.

That winter, Cassie learned, Lucas was to collaborate with the National Youth Orchestra for a set of performances in London.

'What are you doing up here, Lucas?' Alex said. 'Just visiting family?'

'That too,' said Lucas. 'I've actually taken some leave to work on something of my own.'

'Rea-lly!' said Lynn. 'We didn't know you composed too. Did we know he composed, Justin?'

'We knew,' said Justin, smiling. It was a habit of his mother's to discuss family knowledge as if it were self-evidently a communal resource.

'Is it something classical?' said Alex.

'No, actually, it's jazz,' said Lucas. 'A jazz suite.'

'Oh, of course yes, I remember that was your thing,' said Lynn. 'What does one do with a jazz suite? Are you planning to record it?'

'I'm not sure yet. It doesn't really matter to me if it goes anywhere or not, I've just had the bones in my head for ages, and no time spare to flesh them out. Nor the guts, if I'm honest. I feel I owe it to myself, now.'

Alex nodded, with a meaningful glance across the coals at Justin.

As it was another fair day, her father had made a braai, and he was tending the meat while Justin did what he did best: serve drinks.

The meaningful glance was lost on Justin, who was looking at Lucas, with the same naked opportunism in his face that she had seen, briefly, on Rex's, when he had asked her if she could sing.

'How do you write music?' Lynn said. 'If I may ask.'

Cassie had been waiting for the right moment to ask him a related question, but he provided the answer himself.

He explained that there was a verbal shorthand system for music used by the visually impaired, that could be dictated and transcribed into normal musical notation, and that the same system could be used, *mutatis mutandis*, to read it.

'But in my case I do all right with written notation,' said Lucas. 'There's a software package I use to blow it up really big. I have my laptop rigged up to a footpad that moves it along. The only problem is I can't see much at a time, so I have to do that a lot, and it interferes with the pedals.' He smiled. 'That's why I like jazz. There's no right and wrong, and sheet music is an afterthought. No learning by heart. Just improvisation within a structure.'

Cassie had planned to follow up the question by asking for a favour. She had contemplated the notion of asking Lucas this favour very briefly once before, before dismissing it as physically impossible.

Knowing, now, that it was possible after all, she considered it anew, but found several further reasons to hesitate. She was not sure she knew him well enough to ask. Of course, to her, it was a much more personal request than it might seem to him. But she was also not yet sure of the scope of the task; whether it was something that would take him minutes, or hours.

She was hoping to get him alone that day and scout out the territory, but after lunch, Justin accosted him, and they remained deep in private conversation until Chris came to pick him up at four. Watching them out in the garden, sitting across the bench table from each other, taking rumanitive pulls at their beers between words and gestures, she guessed what they were discussing, and decided she could not add a second request on the same day.

At the last moment she changed her mind. He must have been confused to find her following him down the path, pursuing some triviality as she attempted to find an angle.

'Well, I'm sure we'll see you again soon,' she said at the gate, having decided, at last, to give it more thought.

'Of course. I'd still like to hear more about those goats of yours.'

Cassie laughed, sure he was only being polite. 'If you can bear it.'

Waiting in his van, Chris rolled down the window. 'Luke,' he shouted, 'kindly move your exalted haiverin' arse.'

Lucas nodded and turned for the road.

'By the way,' she called after him. 'I've noticed that some people call you Luke and others Lucas. Which do you prefer?'

'I don't mind, really,' said Lucas. 'As long as you don't call me George. Everyone up at the farm calls me Luke, because that's what my family's always called me. Everyone down in Edinburgh calls me Lucas, because that's what it said on the notice boards at uni. So if you call me Lucas I'll think of you as a friend, and if you call me Luke I'll think of you as family. I'll answer to either.'

Cassie called him Lucas. She had enough honorary brothers.

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'Well obviously we have to have percussion,' said Justin. 'But why do we *have* to have brass?'

'Jazz is no fun without a brass section,' said Rex.

'A brass section is unnecessary if someone's singing.'

'You're going to *sing*?'

'Aren't I?'

'Are you? We might as well play blues instead, at that rate.'

'What kind of a thing is that to say?'

'I am not up for a lounge act.'

'Well just so you know, we're not having sax,' said Justin.

'Silveira,' said Rex, 'I would be very worried if we were.'

The debate had started on their way up to the farm, in a minivan containing Cassie, Justin, Rex, three guitars, two amps, a computer, and a manila envelope.

It had continued throughout the process of carting and setting up the equipment, and had yet to show signs of abating.

As she watched the ever-astounding result of Lucas's agreement to Justin's suggestion that they get together and muck about a bit some time, Cassie made up her mind once and for all that her father was wrong in thinking his step-son was lacking in drive and commitment.

He had dropped out of applied maths with drive and commitment. He had gotten into trouble with the authorities in Thailand with drive and commitment. He had seduced his lecturer with drive and commitment, and now, before her eyes, he was galvanised into astounding resourcefulness as, with drive and commitment, he set about forcing a band into existence, against all odds.

Within the space of a few days, he had convinced Lucas to give over some of his composing time to a collaborative effort, ('for old time's sake,') parlayed Rex into moonlighting ('for the good of your future,'), arranged indefinite custodianship of a colleague's minivan, and – the hardest part – convinced Kilgrey management to allow them to rehearse and record on the grounds. ('For one thing, the piano is there, for another, there are no neighbours, and in closing, Lucas can't drive.')

Cassie happened to know that Lucas was not half so committed as Justin had made him out to be to Rex, and that Rex was not half so committed as Justin had made him out to be to Lucas. But, reasoning that resolve often follows in the wake of action, not the other way round, Justin had seen that the most important thing, for now, was simply to get them all in a room with some instruments.

Justin himself was crackling with enthusiasm, rubbing his hands together whenever he spoke and knocking over more things than usual.

Having seen the piano in the chapel, Cassie had somehow assumed they would be playing there, but instead they had gone to the schoolhouse, where she discovered that there was a second upright piano in what had once been the assembly room.

The only people there when they arrived were one of the residents from Rowan House, and a staffer, also from Rowan House. They were playing chess, and said the music would not bother them. Actual music, however, had yet to grace the scene.

Between them, Rex and Justin had now talked the number of as yet hypothetical band members up from four to seven. 'You'll be wanting doo-wop girls, next,' said Rex.

'I think, perhaps, we should cease needlessly multiplying entities, for the present,' said Lucas, who had maintained throughout, to Cassie's eyes, a little of the air of a father indulging his two small sons in a round of Junior Trivial Pursuit.

'What?' said Justin.

'Occam's Razor,' said the Rowan House resident, from the corner. His name was John, and Cassie had not had to ask to find out that he was schizophrenic. He had told her himself, the night of the Easter celebration, when he had stopped in briefly at Hill Cottage. She had found him arguing with Nick about global warming, and, taking him for a staffer, Cassie had asked him which house he worked in. After setting her straight with bluff correctitude, he had proceeded to furnish her with an exhaustive description of his condition, along with a critical analysis of the way it had been handled in medical literature up to that point.

'Occam's Razor?' said Rex. 'The thrash band?'

'The logical maxim,' said Cassie, who, somewhat to her embarrassment, had been furnished with a tambourine. 'Do not needlessly multiply entities.'

'Are you saying we *don't* need a drummer?' said Justin to Lucas.

'Oscar Peterson didn't have a drummer,' said Cassie. Justin blinked at her.

'That's right, he didn't,' said Lucas. 'Neither did Nat Cole.'

'We're playing *swing*?' said Rex.

'Yes, yes, nor do Sisters of Mercy,' said Justin. 'I still don't see what that has to do with us.'

'I'm not saying we don't need a percussion section,' said Lucas. 'I'm just saying that what we *have* is a pianist and two lead guitarists, one of whom is kindly going to take it upon himself to play bass. Guitar. For now.'

His failure to mention the tambourinist did nothing for Cassie's self-esteem.

Justin quickly became more interested in discussing the lesser known Occham's Loofah ("Scrub entities with brisk circular motions") and Occham's Tweezers ("I hate it when these damn entities go septic"), and only when he was thoroughly spent, some thirty minutes after the jam had been declared in session, did he actually pick up an instrument. 'Okay, settle down, that's enough,' he said, as if anyone besides himself had been playing the fool. 'Let's get started, then. Give us an E, Hoagy.'

Lucas turned to the keyboard. Instead of just playing an E, he did a big ostentatious chord crashing glissando, every imaginable variation of E, jazz chords, blues chords, all along the piano's length. The poor upright didn't know what had hit it. The hall reverberated afterwards, the spirits of suspended fourths shuddering against the backs of perfect thirds with ecstatic dissonance, medians curling like cats between the ankles of tonals and subdominants. 'That'll do, thanks,' said Justin, rubbing his ear tenderly.

Lucas brought the piece to a trickling halt, his right hand rushing, as if for its own pleasure, through the next few phrases of a piece that Cassie knew well. He smiled, *ironico*, and, Cassie, her insides thrumming, thought, Sam used to do that.

That was the beginning.

\*\*\*

*If you got to ask what it is, you never get to find out.*

This was what Satchmo said about jazz, and it was also what Sam said about jazz on their first official date, which had started with coffee in Workshop in Merriman Road and ended with Art Tatum in Musikhaus W. Heuer in Bird Street.

'Maybe I haven't heard enough,' Cassie had said, toying with her coffee, adding more milk to make it last longer. Her impression of jazz at that point in her life was of a chaotic, undisciplined genre, the product of chaotic, undisciplined minds that typically hurled themselves in headlong, drug-expedited rushes towards untimely, chaotic, undisciplined ends.

'It's not chaotic,' said Sam. 'And it's certainly not undisciplined. It just seems that way because the structure is hidden. Within it, you're as free as a bird.'

'I just don't really identify with it,' said Cassie.

'I'll play you some,' said Sam, as if this was easily remedied.

She had thought he meant he would play it to her on a CD player. A record player would have been a safer guess, as she later learned, but still incorrect. He played it for her within the next half hour, with his own hands, on a sleek monster of a concert grand with a 'sold' sticker on it.

If it made any sense, she couldn't tell. But she was spellbound by the halfmoons in his thumbnails and the way the keyboard seemed helpless before him, unbuttoned, unravelled, unable to pull itself together, undone by this frenzied music that seemed itself to have no choice but to slalom relentlessly along the course he set for it until its momentum was spent. The clerk smiled. The only other patron gawked.

'And that's bebop,' said Sam when he had finished. 'Or my latest stab at it. I'm still working on it.'

'You wrote that?'

'Not on paper. But yes. What do you think?'

Cassie thought she could learn to identify with it.

It was about five o'clock when she began walking.

The only reason she had accompanied Justin and Rex to the jamming session that day was to ask Lucas the favour. It was a favour she felt she had to ask in person, and she had intended to wait until the end of the session to ask it. But that was before he started playing. Once he started playing, she could do little more than stare, and listen. And listen. And stare.

She had said she was leaving because she thought her tambourine playing was hindering more than helping.

She had left because she couldn't bear any more.

After his capricious opening in E, Lucas had segued directly into the piano cadenza from *Ain't Misbehavin'* by Hoagy Carmichael.

'*Ain't Misbehavin'*,' Cassie had said.

She had said it to herself, really, but Lucas had heard her, and smiled.

'Not bad,' he said. 'Are you a fan?'

'Give her something else,' said Rex. 'We'll find out.'

Lucas began playing *Con Alma*.

'Dizzy Gillespie,' said Cassie. '*Con Alma*.'

Justin gave her an appraising glance, or rather, a re-appraising glance, which ended with a confused approbatory widening of his black eyes. That piece was not even written for piano. It might have been gratifying – she knew he had had her firmly pegged as a musical heathen – but in that moment she couldn't care less if he was impressed. Lucas was playing *April in Spring*.

'Monk,' said Cassie, miserably.

Lucas didn't stop again as he gave her the next six samples to identify. He made a medley of it, bouncing from Dixieland to stride to swing to boogie-woogie to bebop, changing keys, tempos and states of the Union so smoothly that it sounded as if the four decades' worth of musical history he was surveying for them had always been conceived as a single, cohesive whole. The last piece he sampled went back to the roots of the music, back to New Orleans: *Tiger Rag*.

Get off, that's an easy one, said Rex jocularly, dismissive not of Cassie, but of Lucas's choice in the face of Cassie's unanticipated and thoroughly enjoyable expertise.

'What Lucas is playing is the farthest thing from an easy one known to man,' said Justin.

'I mean to guess,' said Rex. 'Not to play.'

Cassie rose at this point and excused herself. He played it as well or better than Sam, and she had to leave. But not before she had said, *Tiger Rag*.

'Whose arrangement?' said Rex.

'Art Tatum,' said Cassie. 'But you changed the key,' she added, to Lucas. She did not have perfect pitch, but she had heard this one enough times, to realise that he had transposed it – unrehearsed, she guessed - in order to bring the impromptu medley 'home' to E: in itself a remarkable feat.

Lucas cocked his head toward Justin, and Justin smiled audibly. It was their way of sharing a glance. 'Girl knows her jazz,' said Lucas.

He was half right.

By five-twenty she had made her way from the schoolhouse up the Kilgrey road, and had taken the footpath to the bench, with half-processed intentions of sitting down to think for a while. But once she was there before the swimming trees, she changed her mind. It was good to be moving, it was better to be on her feet, with the landscape unfolding around her. She kept going, down the other side of the hill, and so she came to the beginning of the forest path that Tom had mentioned to her at Easter.

Although she had merely intended to walk, Cassie could not deny the Harris instinct to be headed towards a specific destination, and as she reached the forest edge she decided that she might as well go and seek out the standing stone.

It was a good day, cold but bright, and although she was under the shadow of trees, Cassie didn't think she would need anything warmer than her denim jacket once she got her blood moving.

I wish I could do what you do, she had said to Justin. What she had meant, was, I wish I could love what I do the way you love what you do. She wished she could be obsessed, consumed, compelled, so entirely, by anything at all, the way Justin was. And Lucas was. And Sam had been. Even Mia, who, Inneke liked to recount, had drawn her first picture before she said her first word.

It was a borrowed passion, this. Her love for jazz had fed on her love for Sam, and now only the husk of knowledge remained.

Cassie thought again of the vinyl record she had found in Camden, and of Mia's eyes as they faced each other in the club bathroom, and felt herself growing suddenly tired, drained, not as if she had been physically fatigued, nor as if she needed sleep, but with the deep, ingrained weariness of one who has been grappling every day, all day, for far too long, with the same problem.

*Now it's the only one you don't have.*

She had been walking for some fifteen minutes when she noticed that the surface beneath her feet had begun to look steadily less like a path, and steadily more like anonymous mulch. But some way in front of her she could hear running water, and thinking that this could only be the burn, she ventured further in. Presently she emerged from beneath the trees onto the lip of the river.



In past years, the flow had evidently been strong enough to cut quite deep into the valley floor, for here there was a narrow gorge, rimmed with rocks. Tom had said the path would take her over the burn, and she had assumed he meant there would be a bridge. But if there had ever been one, it was gone now, and so she was obliged to ford it. She thought of looking for an easier way across, but didn't think the climb looked too difficult where she was now.

It probably wasn't, but she stumbled anyway, cutting her palm on the stones and getting one shoe soaked.

Fed up with the adventure, she decided to turn back towards the farm. She retraced her steps at a brisk pace, her shoe squelching.

She wouldn't give Lucas the nocturne, she decided. She wouldn't ask him if he would play it for her. She would take it home and put it away and not even look at it. And when she saw Mia again, as she eventually must, she would give it to her. She would say, Sam wrote this when he was seventeen. Ben gave it to me and now I'm giving it to you. Now it's yours.

Cassie had been walking for what felt like miles before she began to wonder why nothing looked familiar. She was, however, going uphill, so she figured that she would, at any rate, come out *somewhere* at the top of the pasture, from where she could get her bearings.

But when the hill at last plateaued again, the trees grew only thicker, until she emerged, with some surprise, before a menhir.

'Oh,' she said.

Now that she was there she decided she might as well look the thing over, already disliking it a bit just because it had been responsible for her dunking.

It was made of a dark stone, darker than the other rock in the area, and was roughly rectangular in shape, coming to a blunt end some four metres above the ground. It stood alone in a small clearing, and behind it, the hill climbed again.

Perhaps it's more impressive at night, she thought.

There were no traces of any pagan rituals that she could see. She thought of looking around for humps in the earth that might indicate the remains of other megaliths, a dolmen or a barrow, and perhaps try her hand at ascertaining what point in the calendar the structure might have been intended to mark. But in trying to determine which way was east, she noticed that such sun as had managed to filter down through the forest ceiling was growing dimmer. Cassie decided to turn back.

Not sure what to do to commemorate her visit, she put her hand on the dark surface of the menhir. She left a smudge of blood there from her grazed palm, which she tried, unsuccessfully, to wipe off.

She was pleased to see that there was something that looked very much like a path curving out of the clearing. She followed this for a further half an hour, towards what eventually became the sound of rushing water.

As the sun dipped and the air turned chillier, she heard a forlorn screaming cry that set her blood running cold, until she remembered the barn owl at Easter. It had sounded very human, this time.

She went past a tree she recognised – two trees, really; two hawthornes whose trunks had grown together, and came again to the burn. Just as she was making her way down the rocks, Cassie heard a sound which scared her far worse than the scream she had heard earlier. Firstly because she did not know its source, and secondly because it was very nearby. A throaty, growling bark, like a dog, but from above.

Once again she stumbled, this time right into the water. She lifted her bag to prevent the manila envelope from getting wet, and unable to break her fall with her hands, she landed heavily on her knee. She swore, and waited for the initial twinge to subside before getting to her feet.

She was limping as she found the path she had come by at last, and began climbing the first hill again. The pain had settled not in her knee, but in her ankle, which had gone out from under her when she fell.

It seemed much steeper the second time round, what with all the climbing she had done already, and, she supposed, the recent injury. As she climbed, she anticipated the trees become thinner, but instead they seemed to be growing denser.

Thinking that she had perhaps ended up slightly to one side of where she had first set out, she climbed at an angle, in what she thought was a westerly heading. A few metres further up she came to a dead halt, thoroughly nonplussed. Here was the clearing, and the standing stone was in front of her once more. It could only be the same one; she recognised – now – the trees to either side of it, and if that were not enough evidence, there was the mark of her own blood, dried brown. Frustrated, she limped on past the standing stone, further up, and when she had come to the crest of the second hill she looked out over the forest to draw a bead on her destination. From here, Cassie could quite clearly see the bench, very small and far away, and she set out once more. The light was fading fast.

At last, when she came again to the burn, she realised where she had gone wrong. She couldn't believe how absent-minded she must have been not to have noticed that the gully she had fallen down had been on the wrong side of her as she walked. Her limp must have drawn her in a circle; she had simply walked round the second hill and up another side of it.

As stars began appearing in the chinks in the forest canopy, she found again the big hawthorne with two trunks that had grown together like conjoined twins, corrected her course slightly, and after a further fifteen minutes of traipsing she began climbing the first hill. Three quarters of the way up the sights began to look familiar in the wrong way, and she put off the realisation, mostly because she didn't see how it was possible, that she had done it again.

She swore loudly at the standing stone, which was looking far taller and more ominous as the light abandoned her and as it proved increasingly inescapable. It struck her now as a great big middle finger flipping her off. 'Same to you,' she said. Her tongue flapped like paper in her mouth, and she realised that she was terribly thirsty. That, at least, she could do something about.

Descending to the burn, she followed it downstream to find a good place to drink, and so came to a pool. Although she knew she should drink from the running water rather than stagnant, the water looked so clear and good that she ignored the rule. Kneeling there, she looked up, and gasped.

On her first two nights at Kilgrey, the sky had been cloudy. But now it was clear, and out here where there was no electric light, the night stood revealed, encrusted, bristling, teeming with more stars than she could remember seeing anywhere since she and Sam had taken a weekend trip to Sutherland in third year.

Never before had she seen the northern sky so crowded. Above her, in the space over the river, she saw what looked like its double, a river of stars, its banks the shivering tree-tops, and above the pool, a leaf-rimmed pool of stars. The water itself was so still that she could name the constellations it held mirrored.

She saw the moon far away, and despised it dimly for a moment, before she realised that in its smallness and flatness it had reminded her of a pill. She had had enough of pills. She imagined its granular edges scraping along and catching in her throat. The thought made her take two more double handfuls of water. It was so gelid it numbed her lips and made her gums sing. She swallowed Orion, and Cassiopeia, and Monoceros, then rose, refreshed, and – this time by design as much as accident – returned to the standing stone.

Here Cassie decided she would rest for ten minutes, think carefully about the route she had followed the first time round, and then try again. Because she didn't want to look at it, nor encourage the impulse to anthropomorphise it, she sat down with her back against the standing stone. She rolled up her jeans-leg and looked at her ankle, which was beginning to swell. Then she took off her wet shoe. She was a few minutes undoing the swollen laces. She poured the wet gravel out, blew on her hands, and to her immense surprise, started crying.

She felt as if she were two selves, the one watching the other cry and feeling embarrassed and impatient, the other only self-pitying. Occasionally she heard another hellish screech; and once, another deep barking croak. Both, thankfully, distant.

She wasn't sure how long she had been sitting there, but the stars had shifted, and the tears were a tight salt mask on her cheeks, and she had decided three times that she really must get up now and try again to find a way home, when she heard, from an indeterminable direction and some distance away, a yodelling bark that she immediately recognised. What had Lucas said the dog's name was? Banshee.

'Banshee,' she called, her cold vocal chords cracking the word into halves. She swallowed. 'Banshee! Banshee! Here boy! Or girl!' She tried to whistle the way Lucas had, but her first effort was such a flop that she decided to stick to calling the dog's name. On the fourth attempt the bark sounded again, closer, and this time was joined by another; a deep, hearty, I'm-a-lumberjack-and-I'm-

okay belling that she thought must belong to the big dog called Brock. She stood up and headed towards the sounds, still bearing one shoe in her hands.

'Cassie?' The voice seemed to come from several directions at once.

'Lucas!'

'Where are you?'

'By the... by the cat stone.'

'Stay where you are, I'll come to you.'

She could only obey, her initial relief already making way for embarrassment.

'Mar-co,' called Lucas after a minute or two. His voice was closer, and definitely below her, but she was still unsure as to which quarter it came from.

'Polo,' Cassie called back, smiling. Her lower lip cracked and she sucked it. There was another pause of about a minute, and then Banshee burst into view over the rise.

'I can see Banshee,' called Cassie.

'Almost there.'

Brock made his arrival next, his great pink spatula of a tongue lolling out of the side of his mouth. He offered Cassie a magnanimous dousing of slobber, dealt with Banshee's greeting, and nosed over to the standing stone, where he lifted his leg and relieved himself copiously.

A moment later Cole came into view, and then Lucas.

'Hello,' said Cassie. It was strange to use a speaking voice after all that shouting.

'All right?'

'For the most part. I got completely lost.' She wanted very much to hug him, but instead lavished her affection on Cole, sinking her freezing hands into his ruff and telling him that he was an excellent dog. He was accepting but unresponsive, as usual. It is right to give thanks and praise.

Lucas seemed amused. 'I thought you didn't like dogs,' he said.

'I like this dog. How did you know where to look for me?'

'I didn't. The groundskeeper said he thought you might have come here.' He reached into his jacket pocket and produced a torch. 'For you,' he said with a smile. She took it sheepishly. 'Shall we be on our way?'

'I just need to put my shoe on.'

'You took your shoes off?'

'Just the one. I had a bit of a stumble in the burn.'

'Ah, you're a right disaster aren't you,' said Lucas, grinning. He took his jacket off and held it out for her to take.

'What about you?'

'I have thick blood.'

The jacket smelled of dog with undertones of horse. As she pulled it on, she inquired after Justin and Rex, and so learned that Justin had gone to search the cottages and surrounds while Rex stayed at the schoolhouse in case Cassie came back.

'Do you have a phone on you? Hadn't you better call them off?' said Cassie.

'There's no reception here,' said Lucas. 'We'll try our luck when we get to the top of the hill.'

They had not gone ten feet when Lucas said, 'you're limping.'

'That would be from my second fall,' said Cassie. 'It's not too bad.'

Lucas chuckled in his throat. 'Hand me back that torch a minute.' Cassie did so. 'Put your hands against my back and walk behind me... No, both of them, so I can take some of your weight.' Once again, it was not a request. They went at a slow pace, without speaking, down the steep part of the hill, Cassie behind Lucas, Lucas behind Cole. She could see the dog's sure hind feet and wondered to what extent Lucas was relying on whatever information he absorbed through the leash.

When they had made it safely to the bottom of the hill he pulled off his gloves and held them out for her to take.

'Not your gloves too,' said Cassie.

'Your hands chilled my back right through my jumper, lassie.'

Cassie accepted the gloves. They were same fingerless ones he had worn on the train, fleece-lined and warm inside.

'Well then. Everyone present and accounted for?' he said. 'How's that leg? Will she hold?'

'She'll hold.'

Now on level ground, he offered her his arm as he had once before, though this time to support her weight more than to guide her, and returned the torch to her. 'Home, lad,' he said to Cole, as if giving directions to his driver, and they set off through the forest, the beam of light playing from distance to distance as it glanced off the trunks of trees and the valley floor. The other two dogs following their own orbits around Lucas, with the diameter of Banshee's being about three times that of Brock's.

As they walked, Cassie asked Lucas about the screaming noise she had heard, which he told her could be any one of a number of things, from a hare being attacked by a fox, to a fox being attacked by another fox, to a barn owl. Cassie said she thought the latter most likely, as she was fairly sure the noise had come from the trees. Thinking of noises from trees, she next described the barking croak. Lucas was nonplussed, and she tried to imitate it for him, at which he produced a laugh of a volume and force she hadn't expected from him, soft-spoken as he was, and said he thought she might have heard a bullfrog.

Gradually the shift of strain in her thigh muscles alerted Cassie to the fact that they were walking uphill.

'Thank you for coming to get me,' she said as the forest grew thinner around them.

'Was the trip worth your while?'

'Hardly,' she said with feeling, and then thought belatedly that it might offend him. 'I mean it was interesting, the megalith, just...'

'Just not worth a sprained ankle?'

'Do you think it's sprained? I hope it isn't.'

'You'll find out very soon.'

'You must think I'm a moron,' she said.

'Why would I think that?'

'In the time I've known you, I've gotten myself lost twice.' She did not mention that she also felt like a moron because the first time she saw him she had almost offered to help him off the train. Thank goodness she hadn't.

'Ah, now, Cassie. Don't feel that way. Fangorn will play tricks on people. They say it's on a ley line, you know.'

'Tom mentioned that,' said Cassie. She paused. '...Fangorn?'

'Kilgrey Forest. Just my little joke. It's from -'

'*Lord of the Rings*.'

'Aye.'

'Like the horse. Gandalf.'

'Aye. He's my horse.'

'And it's *your* little joke, you said?'

'I think that's what I said, yes.'

'I thought it was Justin's.'

'No. We used to play '*Lord of the Rings*' as children. For days, sometimes. The cat stone was our Orthanc.'

Cassie felt a little woozy and maudlin, imagining the strapping Carmichaels as children with toy swords and bows, shouting 'O Elbereth! Gilthoniel!' and attacking the hordes of orcs pouring from the bowels of the menhir. 'Does anyone know what it was built for?' she asked. 'Are there theories?'

'It's not been investigated much,' said Lucas. 'Not to my knowledge, anyway. Are you keen on that sort of thing?'

'Ley lines? No. I don't believe there's anything to them, if that's what you mean. As one writer pointed out, you can plot a straight line through country pubs. Another guy plotted a straight line through forty telephone booths.'

The trees were thinning. She thought she knew where they would emerge - above the farmhouse - but to her surprise they come out by the bench. The schoolhouse lay below them.

Cassie sat down on the bench immediately, and began rubbing her ankle, which was hurting more than she had let on. Then she had a thought. 'Tell me Lucas,' she said. 'Do you have anything to do with these carvings? Sam and Frodo?'

'Are those still there? Imagine that. Yes, I had a hand in them.'

'And you would be Sam?'

'How did you guess?'

'Danny,' said Cassie. 'Danny was asking after Sam one night.' The toy dog and the chuckle had just fallen into place, along with Danny's habit of avoiding eye contact, which she now suspected to be the product not of social maladaptation, but hero worship.

'Asking? He spoke?'

'Yes.'

'To you?'

'Yes, to me.'

'That's unusual.'

'So I'm told. The whole thing's been bothering me for ages.' She was grinning like an idiot and hoped he couldn't tell.

'Bothering you?'

'Just a mystery to occupy myself with. So who is Frodo?'

'Now there's a question.'

'Oh, don't toy with me. I've wondered for long enough.'

He laughed. 'I say that only because it was a bone of some contention between myself and the little lass concerned.'

'Lass? Frodo was a girl?' She had thought it might be Chris.

'Not that she would admit to it back then, but yes. Frodo Baggins was a childhood friend of mine, who was also known to go by the name of Aragorn son of Arathorn, Legolas Greenleaf, Saruman the White, and occasionally, Susannah Shaeach.'

'Susannah!'

'She practically lived here, when we were kids.'

Cassie was feeling decidedly less woozy and maudlin already. 'Were you very good friends?' she said.

'She was in Chris's year at school. We were all thick as thieves, though. Danny was up here anyway since their mother passed on, and she was quite lonely living with her grandparents, so she used to come up with us after school a lot, and on weekends.'

'I didn't know she lost her mother,' said Cassie.

'She doesn't talk about it much.'

They continued on down to the Shire, and as they walked Lucas told her how he and Susannah used to take the horses – Gandalf, and the other one Cassie had seen, Ruby, and dare each other to jump the burn. Lucas would pretend to be the Nine, riding Ruby because she was a dark horse, and appropriately ill-tempered, while Danny, enlisted as Frodo with the wound of the Fell King in his shoulder, would cling terrified in front of Susie on Gandalf.

'So that would make her Glorfindel?' said Cassie.

'Sometimes,' said Lucas, smiling. 'Are you also a fan, then?'

'I'm reading it now. Justin gave it to me. I'm an initiate.'

'I envy you, reading it for the first time,' said Lucas.

Sometimes Hattie would be roped in to play Gollum, he went on, which she pulled off with aplomb, being required to do little other than skulk behind trees saying 'my precious' and 'nasty hobbitses.'

Cassie laughed, as much at the idea of the little burn taking on the role of that huge river as of Hattie playing Gollum.

Lucas told her, 'It's not always so little. It's been dry this year, but some winters it can swell to quite impressive size. If you had fallen in some other night, you might be a goner now.'

He talked well; he had the knack of talking things to life. She thought perhaps the accent leant itself to this; storytelling, and was curious to imagine that he must be seeing it, these memories; he must surely be watching them in his head, to be able to conjure them like this. At some point, as she listened, Cassie closed her eyes, to see what it was like to walk and talk and not see.

'All right, lass?' he said almost immediately.

'Yes.' She opened her eyes. It had just occurred to her that he might have no idea whatsoever of what Susannah looked like now. 'How old were you?'

'I'm sorry?'

'I'm sorry,' echoed Cassie, who knew she tended to be abrupt when intrigued. 'When you started losing your vision. I was just wondering.'

'I was eight. It went on from when I was eight until I was seventeen. And that was it.'

He's never seen Justin, thought Cassie, as the schoolhouse glimmered into view beneath them.

Justin was in the parking lot, with a cell phone in his hand. He closed it as he spotted them, and threw both hands into the air. 'Hallelujah,' he called.

'So,' said Lucas to Cassie. 'Alive and well.'

She let go of his arm. 'Where's Rex?' she said to Justin.

'He took the shuttle down,' said Justin.

'I'm sorry.'

'Never mind.' He looked at Lucas. 'Call it a day, shall we?'

On the way down to town, Justin didn't ask her why she was quiet, or why she had walked out of the schoolhouse, or mention anything further of her disappearance other than to ask how her ankle was feeling. 'Shall I take you home to your dad's now?' he asked as they entered the outskirts of Edinburgh.

Cassie paused. 'If you don't mind having me over, it will save you the drive.'



Justin nodded.

'I'm sorry for ruining your session,' Cassie said again.

'No worries.' He had seen the manila envelope poking out of her bag.

He talked a little about what they had accomplished that day, which was mostly to talk about what they would accomplish on the next day. Then he told her about their further debates on the subject of drummers, and how everyone wanted Cormac, their drummer from Cu Sith, but that no one knew where he was, and that they were thinking of asking a session musician named Frank Scarth who was underrated and had once drummed for Nascent Truth, but that he would expect money, although he owed Rex a favour, and that they had considered a fellow they knew from uni named Dick, who was brilliant, except that he was mostly into metal and had in any case since become a building contractor. Then he talked about what a fantastic pianist Lucas was, and how close they were to getting their old vibe back, and by the time they had walked up the stairs at the tenement building in Marchmont, Cassie carrying his leads, Justin with a guitar on his back and an amp in his arms, he had talked himself into his self-propagating enthusiasm again. Now with nobody but Cassie to expend it on, he immediately opened the guitar case and began asking her what she thought of this chord sequence. Eventually, when the energy turned inward, she went to make him coffee, which he took black, with three and a half sugars.

When she returned from the kitchen, he was lost to the world, sitting cross-legged on the ground, scribbling. Cassie put the coffee on the floor beside him and began making herself a bed on the couch. So many passers-through spent the night there that the spare linen was never put away. Nor washed, Cassie thought, resignedly. She lay down.

'I can go to my room if you want the light off,' said Justin.

'I like listening to you,' said Cassie.

He went on humming to himself. That all-too familiar fond concentration. Justin's version had the slightly moon-eyed cast of the zealot to it, which Cassie attributed, unreflectively, to his being Catholic. She watched him working until he asked her, politely, not to.

'Are you writing something?' said Cassie. Although writing was a misnomer in his case, she thought. He picked up a pen like a Westerner picking up chopsticks, with awkwardness and vague resentment.

After a few moments, he said 'Hmm.'

'What's it like?' said Cassie. 'Composing.'

This time there was not even a 'hmm,' and she turned over onto her back and closed her eyes, giving up, before discovering that once again she had been wrong in thinking that he wasn't listening.

'Composing music,' said Justin, 'is like the Quickening.'

'The -?'

'Oh, don't say it, I can't bear it. It's from *Highlander*. I don't want to hear that you haven't seen it.'

She rolled over to face him again. 'Actually,' she said, with triumphant and ill-founded indignation, 'I'll have you know, I have seen *Highlander*.'

'Great,' said Justin. 'Wonders never cease. Then you'll remember, right, that when one Immortal kills another –'

'One... immortal?'

'I thought you said you'd seen it.'

'Oh, wait a minute, sorry. My mistake. I was thinking if *Zoolander*.'

Justin groaned. 'Sooo,' he began, suffering politely, 'in *Highlander*, there are these immortal beings. They hunt each other down and duel with broadswords.'

'Why?'

'Because the only way to kill an Immortal is to chop his head off.'

'But why do they have to kill each other at all?'

'Because there can be only One.'

'Why can there be only one?'

'That's, that's just the way it is.'

'And this all happens in Scotland, does it?'

'What? No, no. It happens all over, and eventually in New York.'

'Then why is it called –'

'Just... *because*, Cassie. You ask too many questions. Can you never just stop *thinking*?'

'I should hope not.'

'It's bloody exhausting just listening to you. I don't know how you manage to – oh. Wait. I see how you might be confused.' He had been rubbing his temples with the little finger and thumb of one hand up to this point, but now he stopped.

'Oh, good,' said Cassie, who had had a feeling that she was once again on the point of broaching that area of his mind the navigation of which required the aid of a compass and a machete.

'The Highlander is the protagonist,' said Justin, 'and he is indeed originally from Scotland.'

'Aha!'

'Or to be strictly accurate, he's from the planet Zeist, but that was a misguided sequel blunder that should never have been introduced into the story and is largely ignored. But anyway, whenever one Immortal kills another, there's lots of blue lightning, and usually some screaming, and windows breaking and so forth, and the survivor absorbs the Power, the life-force, of the defeated Immortal. And that's the Quickening.'

'I see,' said Cassie. 'So composing music is like decapitating an alien.'

'I strongly feel,' said Justin, 'that you have missed the thrust of my analogy.'

'I don't know much about sci-fi. Is it the blue lightning that's more important?'

'The blue lightning is, as you say, a key element. Most of all though, it's the absorbing of the life-force. The feeling of lightning in your, in your *veins*.' He looked a little embarrassed, like Ben Loudon

when he had used the word “beautiful.” ‘..Like you’ve had a jolt, a surge, of extra aliveness,’ he went on. ‘Like –’

‘Being in love?’ said Cassie.

‘No-o,’ said Justin, and then, more decisively: ‘No. Precisely not. It’s like the opposite of being in love. If you can imagine such a thing.’ He had been going to say, ‘like when you pick up a +100 Health Pack in *Quake*’, but her suggestion had made that seem a little trivial, and he preferred his new idea. There was a truth in what he had just said, an organic aptness, which gave him the same small glow of gratification that he experienced when returning to the root note in a twelve bar blues joint.

Cassie was afraid that she might be able to imagine it only too well.

‘...Because it’s all you,’ Justin went on. ‘It’s caused by you, not someone else. Made by you, contained in you, externalised by you. You alone.’ He didn’t know why Cassie’s face was developing that blank look that he was learning to interpret either as sadness or anger. His money was on sadness. ‘Of course,’ he said, ‘I can only speak for myself.’

‘Of course,’ said Cassie morosely. She wondered if Mia felt this way when painting, or whether the sensation Justin described was peculiar to males. It sounded as if it might be. The theft element of the little allegory, the act of creation necessitating an extrinsic power source, was decidedly Promethean.

But she was sad, because she was thinking of Sam, and how verisimilitudinous a picture Justin had given her of the inside of him in moments when she was allowed only on the outside, and then only on the sidelines, where she would not obtrude. Blue lightning sounded about right. It was all but visible, coming out of his ears and eyes and fingers, if one could imagine that the thunderclap was syncopated. You dig.

‘Something wrong?’ said Justin.

‘No.’

The opposite of love. It was, as she had always guessed, a solitary pleasure. The thing that ruled him, his great passion, his music, his own music, as she’d always suspected, had nothing whatsoever to do with her.

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So she hated Sam’s piano. Had always hated it. What was wrong with that? Who wouldn’t have, in her position? Simone de Beauvoir, perhaps. Simone de Beauvoir would have shaken her head superciliously at Cassie, and said, find your own Piano. But what did Simone de Beauvoir know? Did she ever have to stand at the door clearing her throat and say, four times, ‘Jean-Paul, your *mother* is on the *phone* from *San Francisco*’ before the old fart even registered her presence?

Very probably she had, barring the part about San Francisco.

But nevertheless, Cassie was convinced she had a point, or at least, that her feelings were justified.

No infidelity could have been more galling, or time-consuming, or more brazenly thrown in her face. There he was, stroking it lovingly, drawing from it shivers of ecstasy, sighs of yearning, rapturous crescendoing waves of passion. She had been schooled not to interrupt until he (it; they!) had finished. She was playing second fiddle to a piano, and she grew inured to it. She didn't have to like it, but she tolerated it, until it came between them.

It was near the end of what was her Honours year and his final year, the fourth year of their relationship, their second year living together, their first and only year as the custodians of the Jonkershoek house, that Sam had received a long white envelope containing the news that he had gained entrance to Masters in Jazz Performance at the San Francisco Academy of Music. Cassie had not even been told he had applied. His audition video had been recorded in secret, although she had heard every second of the practising, until she took to studying in the cold bowels of the detested Stellenbosch library to escape it.

He had sent them his recording of *Tiger Rag*.

You kept this from me? She had railed, and he defended himself as best he could by saying that if he wasn't accepted, it wouldn't have been worth worrying her about it. She had been planning to move back to Cape Town. He had yet to decide if he would move with her or go to San Francisco, but she had thought, until now, that he was finished with studying. He had never liked it much.

'How many did you apply to? How many schools, Sam?'

'Five.'

'And in South Africa?'

'It's not the right time of year.'

'Were you even going to apply here? Or has this decision been made without me?'

'Of course I would have applied.'

'Would have. So you're not going to.'

'I haven't decided yet, okay?'

They fought. In that one month, everything Cassie had vaguely worried about, the element that was conspicuously absent from this situation – externalised friction – she had it in spades. They fought as they had failed to fight in all the months that had passed since Family Loudon won the Green Card Lottery.

After the envelope arrived, she finally got her wish, finally there was no music, because Sam stopped playing, and at last there was no sound at all, besides the ticking of the grandfather clock, because when all the factors, all the stakes, all the pros and cons had been discussed, torn apart, beyond the point where the words had any meaning, they stopped speaking, too.

South Africa or America, would he stay or would he go. It was the same old question, nothing much had changed, really, besides the odds, which seemed to Cassie unfairly stacked as it was. The

envelope had merely brought it all bubbling out, or almost all of it, and she was damned if it would be she who spat out the other option onto the table. The question would come from him or not at all. She wondered if the possibility had even entered his asinine boy's brain.

*YOU ARE ELIGIBLE!* They were young, but they were not too young; two generations ago she would have been considered an old maid by now. But she would not be the one to bring it up. For a month she held out, a further month, to be strict, because she had already waited three and a half years. How was it possible, she thought, that two people who appeared to be everything to each other, *pretended* to be everything to each other, pretended to be as close as one could get to being one person while still being two, could skirt this one question for the entire three years odd that it had been on the front lines of her mind? But she would not be the one to suggest it. If he was an ass, she was a mule.

Until late one night in summer, as she lay awake in the master bedroom in the darkness of Jonkershoek, which is an open, living darkness, especially at full moon, Cassie thought that maybe the right thing to do would be to tell him to go. Make the decision for him. Because, she reasoned, if he really wanted to stay, he would have said so by now. He was delaying the decision only because of, she could call it tact, or she could call it guilt, or cowardice, but it was becoming sadly evident to her that she could not call it love.

If he was going to ask her at all, ever, he would have asked her by now. The opportune moment had come and gone.

She was witness to, and victim of, a deficit of love. Massive heart failure.

Open your eyes, Cassiopeia, she said to the painted face leaning against the wall of the master bedroom, whose eyes were very much open and had always looked like they belonged to a girl who had her act together to a far greater extent than she did, and was impatient with her irresoluteness, like the ghost of King Hamlet.

She stood up, rolling her socks down first so that her heels were bare. The floorboards were so smooth in this room and the hallway outside that in socks one slipped like a cartoon character running off a cliff. She screwed her courage to the sticking-place and scudded towards his room, their room.

What if he agreed?

Maybe, she thought, she would have a Hollywood Teen Movie scene where he got off the plane at the last moment and came running back to her in the airport formerly known as DF Malan, the onlookers ah-ing, the camera zooming out as they kissed and something by Coldplay crashed cello against snare drum in the background.

It was the first time she had ever left their bed in anger. She had slept in the master bedroom once or twice before, when she was ill or lousy with cramps and could not abide a bedfellow. But never to make a point. It made her think of her parents and feel old, and sad.

I could always come back, he had said.

That's what they always say.

Who?

The people who leave – they always say – and they always could – but people just don't work that way, Sammy, they make *lives*, and... *forget* .. and...

And?

And this *bed* is – too – *HOT!* She was on her feet. The curtains were thick in this room, but her eyes had long since adjusted to the darkness, and she could see all but the titles of the books on her nightstand and the details of his face.

Take your socks off, said Sam. Sleeping in socks makes your whole body hot.

I'm going to your parents' room. Speak about it tomorrow?

She had said the question mark instead of goodnight. She had said the question mark instead of 'I love you.'

She had, of course, expected him to come after her. She lay awake as he continued to call her bluff, waiting, waiting, for him to cross the distance between them. The ten metres between his room and his parents' room; the ten thousand miles between her and his family.

Maybe he would say no, right there in bed where she was about to shake his shoulder, maybe he would realise right then that he could never leave her, and stay.

Maybe he would go, and miss her, and realise then how much he loved her and how ready he was, and come back to sweep her off her feet and onto Virgin Airlines.

There was flagstone underheel now, she was in the kitchen. The moon hung revealed, its light spilling in silver with the older light of the stars behind. Cassie opened the window and looked out at the wizened little olive trees that grew wild on the mountainside, the fruit of which Dianne Loudon pickled each year in great glass jars that even now stood on the windowsill. They were growing and aging and making new fruit that no one would gather and pickle.

There was the King Protea, furry like a sleeping beast, one male bloom and six female. The honeysuckle, and the waxy silhouette of the white and butter-yellow magnolia tree with its hard dark leaves, and the star jasmine. She listened to the crickets zithering, sought out the Southern Cross, named its points, and thought, I am really very lucky, I should count myself lucky. I have this. I have had this. I have been very lucky.

Cassie Harris stood clutching at tenses and smelling the first gusts of a black south-easter and thinking that perhaps she would go outside, but the lock on that back door was a difficult and noisy lock. To tackle it would be to break this contemplative peace, this selflessness on which she knew herself to be verging.

Even the olive trees looked like they were asleep, although the pines behind were restless. She drank a glass of water instead and went through the other door, towards where he lay. He would be asleep, she no longer doubted. Sam worried only by daylight, sensibly.

Maybe he would go, and forget about her, and marry a marine biology major called Sigourney. Maybe that would be better. She would convince him to go. She wouldn't have much trouble.

His door, their door, was closed.

Had he closed it himself? Both of them liked to sleep with the door closed.

Would he really have risen and closed it?

It might have swung shut. It was an old house, built irregularly, and full of caprices.

She stood for a long time looking at the closed door before she turned and scudded back to the master bedroom, and got into bed, and turned towards the wall.

In the minutes that followed it was almost possible for her to believe that she had never left the bed at all, that it was only her intention, her will, her *daemon*, that had wandered forth in stocking feet and stood in the moonlight. But for the coldness of her tongue in her mouth from the cold Jonkershoek water, but for the disc of reflected sunlight that was called moonlight, branded on her retinas, it was almost possible to believe it had been a dream. She swallowed twice and the cold was gone. The retained moon would fade in moments. There is no envelope. She would speak to him tomorrow.

In the end Cassie did not speak to him the next day, or the day after that. She would always remember what followed as having happened when she was about to crack. Whether or not this was true is inconsequential. It was necessary for her to torment herself, as Sam's parents tormented themselves for not having insisted he come.

Just as she was about to crack, then, another long white envelope arrived for Sam, and this one came on wings from Blair's England, with a Royal College of Music postmark.

He had not told her about this application either. But this time she did not rail: it was a way out, a loophole. A university that would have him on full scholarship, a country that would have her on working terms. A whole nother two years' reprieve. Two years would surely be enough. Within two years he would realise he wanted to marry her. There would be no California Girls, no Sigourney with her cross-your-heart bra and her engaging talk of shark parasites to distract him.

Cassie leaned on him a little, perhaps, but really she did believe he would be happy there, and the opportunities would be the same or better. Sam did the necessary negotiations with his parents, and as this new future ramified wildly into being before their perturbed inner eyes, they tried to adjust, as one does, by populating it with potential memories. Their younger son's hair and his vowels would lengthen, his skin would go brown as planned, he would say right on and call his friends dude, but by his side would not be an older version of the same, as they had thought, but a paler creature, of gentler sensibilities, come across for Christmas (Thanksgiving? Thought Dianne, forming worried pictures of cranberry sauce and dill pickles) from a less brashly dazzling clime, casting out not 'right ons,' but 'good shows'; not 'dudes' but 'old mans'. Their elder son would wear a scarf, and his hair would flop into his eyes from a different parting than Ben's, and he would stride across hallowed lawns

that remembered a different sort of glory. But (they told each other), at least both would still be striding across hallowed lawns, and both, still, would do so for free.

'And it sounds right for Sam, doesn't it?' said Dianne. 'Europe is right for a music student.'

'England is not Europe,' said Sam Sr. dubiously. And England was not the birthing ground of jazz, he thought. But he didn't mention that.

It was settled with suspicious efficiency. They would go in January, and work. In September of that year Sam would enrol as a Masters student at the Royal College of Music, while Cassie went on working. They applied for the relevant visas, which arrived in the post two weeks after he died, by courier.



## Full Flower Moon

There was a long moment during the drive between Tooting Broadway and Tooting Bec when Mia and Matt each, privately, considered that they could no longer remember how they row they had started had turned into the row that was, at last, ending.

It had, at any rate, started with an argument about the flat.

Matt had been thinking of Amersham, the bankers' turf.

'It's so far from everything,' Mia had said.

'It's a bit cheaper than the city,' said Matt.

Mia was keen on Angel, and had been trying to win him over to a two-bedroom townhouse they had seen the day before. She wanted to use the second bedroom for a studio. Matt had said it was rather pricey for a two-bedroom.

Since deciding to move in together, they had fallen into that habit of slowing to a hovering halt, together, without conferring, in front of realtor's windows, when they were on foot. In the beginning, Mia had been sure this would be the end of their rut. With Davy out of the picture, and in a space they had made, a space he owned and she inhabited, they could enter the next phase. They could walk side by side, with their heads turned in the same direction, as they were when they stood there looking at the futures tacked up on the inside of the glass. The age of being so claustrophobically face to face would end, its purpose served.

For a while, it had seemed she was right. They had been generous with each other; there had been a new momentum behind everything they did together, pushing them swiftly through and beyond the everyday pettinesses that had formerly had a tendency to snowball into dramas. But she had not foreseen the new breed of conflict that this momentum itself would engender: the question of where exactly it was taking them.

They had started out fighting about the flat, and somehow, from there – Mia supposed she could remember how if she cared to – they had ended up fighting yet again about what would happen in the event of Mia not being able to renew her visa.

'You're expecting me not to get it,' Mia had said. 'You're already planning around a future without me.'

'That's simply not true, Mia,' said Matt. 'I told you, even if you have to leave, for my part, I want to stay together.'

'Well of course you say that *now*.'

A tense silence hung between them; she had as good as accused him of delaying the blow.

It was perhaps the tenth tense silence that month. Mia had gauged it as a four pointer, and turned her eyes to the window to wait it out.

'Why is this happening?' said Matt, quietly.

Mia was surprised. It was not his habit to speak into tense silences. Usually he would keep his peace, looking put-upon, until she was willing to make up with him. 'Why is what happening?'

'You know what I mean.'

Mia knew what he meant. She had picked another fight. She had once again steered a civil discussion into hazardous emotional territory. And once again, he had brought it to a halt by simply ceasing to respond.

Matt's method of defence, and attack, consisted largely in remaining uncommunicative for hours at a time, cloistered in his room with his books, and then bringing her coffee unbidden. Mia had once found this habit endearing, but now she saw his reluctance or inability to stand against her as a weakness.

Lately she was discovering that many of the things she had once thought endearing about him were in fact either indicative of weaknesses, or weaknesses in themselves, or surface tremors of other, as yet undocumented weaknesses that lay in store to cause disaster of unknowable proportions in the future. But now that he was confronting her, she thought she might prefer it the other way.

'I'm just stressed out,' she said. 'We both are.' He probably needed more space and time to himself than he was willing to ask for, she thought. Perhaps she should start sleeping at home again.

'It's more than that,' said Matt. 'You're different.'

Again she was surprised. 'What do you mean?'

'It's like you're not here.'

'Me?' said Mia. 'You hardly even leave your room.'

He sighed.

She thought that maybe she owed Matt an apology, and was about to give it to him, when sirens and lights blared from a cross-street, and a moment later, they saw a man running at an inhuman pace, across the motorway, directly in their path. Tangential limbs, eyes wide and white against black, a brief flash of strong Central African features. Matt hit the brakes and the tyres squealed. The impact of a foot on the hood, a compression in the front shocks, and then he flew – Mia had the impression that he actually flew – over the car, and on down a side-street. A moment later a police horn blared at them to get out of the way.

Mia had not been wearing a seatbelt. Recovering, she found herself clutching Matt's arm. He had thrown it across her in the moment they braked. 'Jesus,' said Mia.

Matt gently asked for his arm back, and put the car into reverse. Three police cars roared past the hood of the Volvo.

'You okay?' said Matt.

'Yes. Yes. You?'

'Fine.'

Matt pulled the car over to the kerb. They sat staring through the windshield for perhaps another minute, as the police sirens receded.

'Do you still want to go?' he said. Mia knew he was not only asking because of the incident.

'Sure,' she said. 'Of course I still want to go.'

They had been, they still were, on their way out to dinner; a celebratory dinner. Mia had officially received the Adamus Gallery commission.

Our worlds are drifting apart, thought Mia as they sat across from each other in Tiger Lil's, with a plate of Mongolian barbecue in between, and their thoughts, their voices, never quite linking. Perhaps they had never really overlapped all that much to begin with.

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Victor Adamus had announced the news over Veuve Clicquot in a restaurant in South Kensington that didn't have any prices on the menu. It had been Fillette who invited her, and she assumed the entire evening was Fillette's idea – she couldn't imagine Victor conceiving of something as ordinary as a surprise announcement.

Mia and Fillette had carried the small-talk. Victor hadn't the knack or the patience, and Matt, it dawned on her only then, was out of place. She could hear the Oxonian leaping forward in his accent to shield him from his retired mechanic of a father and his summers spent playing football in abandoned industrial building sites. She considered for the first time that he was among people of a different order, here in this restaurant, an order of people that, had he been other than he was, he might have been taught to envy or loathe, and that this was very probably why he had been nervous for Fillette's dinner party.

When the waiter came for their drinks order, Victor had said 'Well, I think some Champagne is called for,' as if reading from a script. And Mia had found herself answering, as though she was reading from the same script: 'What are we celebrating?'

The way Fillette beamed at Victor as he broke the news caused Mia to admit a possibility she had hitherto been ignoring. Fillette looked proud, not of Mia, or of Victor, but of herself. Very much as if it was not only the *announcement* of the commission that had been her idea. Who knew what they might have discussed in the Bentley on the way to the gallery, that night in March?

It's how these things happen, Mia had told herself. It's how the business works, it's how names get made. It's not what you know, it's who you know. A contact was a contact, a break was a break, and even if she hadn't been selected on merit, that didn't mean she was without merit. She would prove herself.

On the day that Mia was to begin work on the mural, she arrived at the site with every piece of artistic equipment she owned on her person – all that she could carry, anyway – although rationally she knew that she would very likely need little more than a piece of charcoal that day. She felt more secure with her arsenal of brushes and paints at her side.

She waited outside the security door for some minutes, buzzing intermittently, before she saw some men coming out by the main entrance and realised that it was not locked.

'Only *four* at a time on the skywalk,' called a broad-backed man in a hardhat who was standing in the doorway between the foyer and Room One. There was no sign of Victor.

'Hello?' said Mia, just as a buzzsaw screeched into life, setting her teeth on edge. 'HELLO?' she tried again. The man in the hardhat turned.

'Can I help you?' he said. He sounded and looked vaguely Scandinavian, and in bearing and colouring reminded Mia of Sam Loudon Sr.

'I'm Mia,' said Mia. 'I'm doing the mural. In the foyer.' She pointed.

'Oh you're *that* girl,' said the man. He picked up a second hardhat from a small pile just inside the doorway and gave it to her. 'Well, welcome to ground zero.'

The gallery smelled, that day, of wood shavings, varnish and wet plaster. The crew were installing doorframes, and she saw, modelling the wall in the foyer where the fresco was supposed to go.

'What are they doing?' said Mia, who was alarmed to see something that looked suspiciously like a curvature emerging from the fresh plaster.

'Beats me,' said the man. 'That's the designer's baby.'

Well, actually, it's mine, thought Mia.

Keeping her peace, she followed him through to Room Two, where yet more workmen could be seen on the mezzanine. They had started with the railings on the skywalk. There were at least a dozen people standing on, under, and around it. A compromise had eventually been reached between aesthetics and bureaucracy: the railings echoed the V of the cables, diminishing in height from either end of the skywalk towards the centre.

Even so, Mia's heart went out to Mr. Dyer. The elegant curve of the structure did make less of an impact under the oppression of these heartless verticals.

'Are they going to be busy in the foyer long?' she said.

'I'm not sure. We've had to shift stuff around a bit. We were *supposed* to be starting on those this week.' He pointed through one of the long recessed windows that slotted the walls of the room.

The plot of land on which the Adamus gallery stood had once been a parking lot, and this parking lot had once served the needs of small shopping complex which the Adamus Corporation had since bought up. The man's gesture indicated this building, which Mia had noticed before, and a restaurant beside it, which she hadn't.

"Those?"

'The studios. We're still waiting for the deal to go through.' He patted his stomach. 'Anyway. What do you want me to tell them to do with this?' He looked down at his feet. Mia looked down too. There was nothing of interest that she could see. They were standing on the edge of what she had taken to be a large tarp. 'Your canvas,' he clarified.

'What?' said Mia, leaping backwards onto the cement. 'What is it doing on the floor?' She had told Victor only yesterday that she would like work on theatrical muslin. And here it was. The very next day. On the floor.

The man, following her lead, stepped off the fabric. 'Sorry, the boys rolled it out.'

'Why?'

He shrugged. 'Roberts!' he called up to one of the men on the mezzanine. 'Why did you roll out this nice girl's canvas?'

'The foreman told us to,' said Roberts.

'You're not the foreman?' said Mia.

'No, I'm the architect.'

'Oh! Mr Good...'

'Forgive me,' he said. 'Stefan Gudmundsson.' She shook his hand, and wondered whether it might be polite to say something nice about the building they were standing in. But he didn't seem in the mood for flattery.

'Do you know when Victor – Mr. Adamus – will be arriving?' said Mia, wiping her hand on the seat of her pants to get rid of the sticky dust he had left on it.

'No idea,' said the architect. 'I'm not even supposed to be here, today. I got called in to play nanny.' He pronounced it "nenneh." Mr. Gudmundsson did not appear to feel this was a worthy employment of his time.

'Get someone to roll this stuff back up,' he called to Roberts. 'Where do you want it?' he said to Mia. 'In the foyer?'

'I, uh. No. Not yet. Mr. Adamus suggested I use Room Three. The second floor.'

'Aahhhnnnhhh,' said the architect, rolling his eyes. 'Why did he suggest this?'

'I don't know. I need a wall. A big wall.'

'Okay okay okay. We will have to take all our stuff out of there, you must just give me an hour.' He walked away, speaking to himself in calming tones in a language that sounded made up.

Along with her canvas, Mia was installed upstairs in Room Three, where, at her request, an overhead projector was set up and the windows covered with black fabric. She had asked the crew to tack the canvas to a plastic backing against the wall, and over the next three days she set about tracing her projected cartoon onto the six by ten metre piece of muslin. When she was done with the drawing, she took down the black fabric and laid a wash. When the wash had dried, she began painting.

As she worked, an endlessly varied series of constructive sounds and smells filtered up from the other parts of the gallery. Mia, her headphones on, and for the most part oblivious even to the music, was aware only that one day she was inhaling sawdust, on another cement dust, and on another, creosote fumes. As time passed, she became aware, in a way that was pleasing to her, that each day when she went down the stairs in the evening, reacclimatising as she did so to a three dimensional world, the gallery looked different to how it had been when she arrived that morning. It was coming together.

One day, descending, she gasped to see that the floor of the foyer had been laid with great black marble flagstones. When she had arrived that morning it had been bare cement. She was excited to see them mostly because Victor had enthused about them angrily the day before: they had been quarried in Spain, he had said, and were top of the line.

Those of the crew that remained were standing outside on the plaza.

'Don't walk!' called the foreman from beyond the entrance.

'What do you mean, don't walk?' shouted Mia.

'You can't walk on them yet,' called the foreman. 'The grouting's wet.'

They had forgotten her upstairs. 'How on earth am I supposed to get home, eh?' she shouted, furious.

'Ah. Wait.'

'For what? For them to set?'

'Just wait, I'll call Mr. Adamus!'

'What's he going to do, then? Fly?'

The foreman did not answer her. He began tapping at his mobile phone. Mia was beginning to understand why Victor liked having the Great Architect on hand. Standing marooned on the stairwell, she could see from the foreman's body language that he was on hold, and then, from the way he straightened up, that he had been given to Victor. She heard him exclaiming something, then demurring respectfully, his free hand on his head. Eventually nodding. Then he ended the call, snapped the phone shut, and turned to her with a face like thunder.

'He says you cross the tiles.'

'How?'

'He says you cross the tiles, we break, we lay again. That's what he says.'

'Oh,' said Mia, awed. 'Isn't there some other way?'

For an answer the foreman threw his hands into the air.

Mia crossed the tiles. By jumping, she managed to ruin only five.

She took fewer and fewer shifts in Knightsbridge. She hadn't the time, and could afford to absent herself for a while, having received a very handsome advance from the Adamus Foundation. Besides which, ever since 'that Mr. Stephens fiasco,' as it was called quite freely – and frequently – at the Studio, she felt she had lost whatever credibility she might have once had amongst her colleagues. Chantal continued to make her every working moment a misery without ever saying anything even remotely confrontational. It was a skill peculiar to the British.

The situation at work had become all the more awkward when Mia started receiving more requests than any of the others. She had more than once experienced the awful phenomenon of a room falling silent when she walked in. She had managed to convince herself that she was imagining things, or at least blowing them out of proportion, until she overheard a comment in the staff-room which left little room for doubt. Once again it was Jackie's voice, she had not listened in, but she had heard her name, and the words 'happy ending', and then tittering.

Chantal had been somewhat more restrained, her negativity coming through as an elevated disregard rather than any outright disparagement. But the others seemed to take their tone from her, and augment it with abandon, like violins following a cello in a canon.

Why do you hate me? Mia bit back a hundred times a day.

'I'm sure she doesn't *hate* you,' said Helena.

'Is there anything I can do to help?' said Matt.

'Well, Mia,' said Victor Adamus. 'In order to know what to do about it, you have to ask yourself what she's getting out of it.'

He only rarely showed up in person. Even though she was shut in Room Three on the second storey, she always knew when he was there. He had spent about a half an hour below her today, in Room Two, before coming upstairs. She had followed the progress of his voice and footsteps from corner to corner, and at last she heard the skywalk shake.

'Getting? Out of hating me?' she said.

They had been talking about Fillette, until now. Victor had plans for her business: a second branch, a line of products, eventually, getting the company listed. He had asked Mia for suggestions, and before she knew it, she was talking about her own problems.

It never ceased to jar Mia when Victor referred to Fillette. Spontaneously, time and again, when she was alone in Victor's presence, she forgot that the two of them were connected in any way. And yet, in his absence, trying to imagine them together was a perpetual involuntary game of hers. Did they bath together? What did they *talk* about?

'Hate takes effort. And no creature expends time and energy on any activity unless that activity yields an actual or perceived reward.' He had one hand up against the wall, and all the fine tessellated wrinkles on his wrist and hand had been lined with cement dust from downstairs. 'So, three questions,' he continued. 'What is she getting, or what does she believe she is getting, or will get, out of hating you? What can you do to remove that incentive? And, is it worth *your* time and energy to do so?'

'Hmm,' said Mia, catching up. Thinking about Fillette while he was talking had confused her for a moment into wondering what he meant by suggesting that Fillette hated her. 'It would certainly be worth my time and energy if I could get her to stop making me feel so unwelcome.'

There was a tiny cut on the heel of his hand which he had not yet noticed, and she watched the pilgrimage of the blood as it moved down towards his wrist through the contours of the little wrinkles; encountering cement dust, impeded, saturating, continuing, impeded. Saturating. A voice spoke as if from nowhere in her head:

*If it bleeds, you can kill it.*

Her mouth jerked, not with fright, but with restrained laughter. Where had that come from, so suddenly? It was a line from some or other bad horror movie. Surely.

'So let us start from the basics. How is hating you empowering her?'

'Empowering her?'

'The will to power is, in the end, the only motivating force.'

'She hates me because I'm getting special treatment, that's all. So what must I do? Stop getting special treatment?' That would mean quitting, at the end of the day.

'Ah. That's only one option. You could also make it more attractive for her *not* to hate you.'

'How?'

'Offer her an alternate source of power.'

'By... giving her power?'

'*Perceived* rewards, Mia.'

Mia began giving Chantal Flick special treatment. On the very next of her increasingly infrequent shifts, she knocked at Chantal's door and, with as much humility and charm as she could muster, asked if Chantal would be willing to teach her how to do reiki.

Chantal said she would.

It had, of course, occurred to Mia that by his own lights (or at least, Nietzsche's), Victor must believe he was deriving, or would derive, some form of power from helping her. She knew that it could not have failed to occur to Victor that this might have occurred to her. She dealt with this state of affairs in her own way, pushing levers blindly, by feel, but with a certain native competence. When he came back the next Friday, he found her sitting cross-legged on the floor, her feet bare and dirty, with a sketchpad open in front of her, drawing trees. She had tied her hair in a high pony, and wore no



makeup. He came to stand next to her and she lifted her face to greet him. He met her eyes – his hair flopping forward around his ears – and then looked straight ahead, towards the canvas, but not at it. You are very wise, he said.

They had underestimated each other.

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The first time Sebastian showed up at the gallery, it took Mia a moment to recognise him. He looked more like a refugee than ever. Over his customary black v-neck jersey he was wearing a black highwayman's coat that had seen higher times, and he had shaved his hair to a sleek quarter-inch shadow on his skull.

'What's with the footy-lad hairdo?' said Mia, having let him into the building.

'The colour was growing out, I looked silly.'

'Growing out?' She looked at him more closely. What remained of his hair was no longer reddish gold, but dark; Fillette's colour. 'I never realised it was dyed,' she said.

'It was Dane's firm conviction that Puck should be a blond,' said Sebastian, glancing round at the wall-length mirror behind the reception desk and raising his hand to his own reflection in a glad-you-made-it kind of way.

'I would hardly have called that colour blond,' said Mia.

'Yes. Unfortunately the peroxide didn't take too well. Anyway, back to my roots, eh? Har har har.'

'So, what are you doing here, if you don't mind my asking?'

He had already passed her, and was peering up at the skywalk through the entrance to Room One. He shook his head at the structure with incredulous disdain, as if it had been a consistent disappointment to him for many years, and had just, unbelievably, topped itself. 'Oh...' he said, 'I thought I'd come and check the place out,' he said.

'Where did you get that coat?'

'You like it?' he said, taking a few steps further into the room and leaning forward to look through into Room Two. 'It's bigger than it looks from the outside.'

He turned and faced her, put his hands in his pockets. His eyes were blue again today. 'Come on then,' he said. 'Take a break. I'm going to buy you lunch.'

'I don't really have time.'

'Of course you do. We can go next door.'

Although she passed it every day, Mia had never set foot in the Italian bistro next to the gallery, and upon entering, she wished she had thought to do so sooner. She instantly recognised it to be her kind of place. It was cosy and garlicky smelling, and by the electric fire there lay a very pregnant cat.

'She is suppose to stay upstairs,' said the manager, maitre d' and owner, who was not Italian, but Turkish. He was speaking not to Mia and Sebastian, but to his wife, who was Cornish, and the chef.

'Then you put her upstairs,' she called.

'You want the fucking inspector shut us down, eh? Put the cat upstairs or I gonna call him myself, you bastards.'

'Table for two,' said Sebastian.

He did not congratulate her on getting the commission, did not so much as make mention of it. He did not ask her how it was going either, or how she was doing, or what she was doing, or how Matt was. He sat back in his chair with the menu open like a newspaper in front of him, rubbing his stubble with three fingers and humming under his breath, as if they had been doing this every Tuesday for the last twenty years.

Mia, nonplussed, but hungry, glanced at her menu and ordered pasta primavera.

Sebastian ordered a rare steak. He offered her a bite when it arrived, sawing it free with small bloody movements.

'No thanks,' said Mia. 'I don't eat meat.'

'Ah yes. "An' it harm none, do as thou wilt." Isn't that your motto?'

She could smell where he was going with this. She actually saw his eyes sliding over to the leather jacket hanging over the back of her chair.

'No, that's the Wiccan Rede,' she said. 'I am not Wiccan.'

'Yet!'

'I believe you shouldn't eat anything you wouldn't be willing to kill yourself. That's all.'

'As a motto that has rather limited application,' said Sebastian. 'I mean, it doesn't really cover the entire gamut of human experience, does it?'

'I never said it was my motto. It's just why I don't eat meat.'

'What is your motto?'

'I don't have one.'

'Shall I tell you mine?'

'I have no doubt that you shall.'

'Be careful when choosing the source of your self-esteem.' He punctuated the air with his fork, then put the bit of steak impaled on its end in his mouth. 'Anyway, I'd like to try and see you kill a tuna. Do you know how big those buggers get?'

'I said willing, not capable. What was that about my self-esteem?'

'Vegetarianism,' said Sebastian, 'much like Wicca, is very seldom motivated by anything more noble than the desire to convince oneself that one is caviar when one is really just polony like everyone else. Nobody wants to be just another unidentifiable white speck in one big bland homogeneous lump. Enter gluten-free pasta. Enter Pilates. Enter Anne Ambleside.'

'Enter ridiculing other people's life choices.'

'Touche,' he said, chewing unrepentantly.

'Why pick on Wicca anyway? Why not have a go at religion in general?'

'Because unlike most religions, it is, in the overwhelming majority of instances, hand-picked by its adherents.' He belched elegantly. 'As 'twere from a catalogue. Consider Fillette.'

Well, *somebody* should, thought Mia, not at all surprised to find that this was where his train of thought was leading. She began winding a strand of tagliatelle around her fork with infinite care.

'Aren't you happy that she's found fulfilment?' said Mia.

'She hasn't found fulfilment. She's gone nuts. Again. Although I'll grant you, at least this kind of nuts is better than the old kind of nuts.'

'What do you mean, the old kind of nuts?'

'The whole Quintin Hays disaster, when she was carted off to rehab and all. Don't get me wrong. I'm happy she's over it, even if she's just traded crutches. At least she isn't so bloody excruciatingly thin anymore.'

'Rehab?' said Mia. 'What?'

Sebastian stopped chewing for a moment, pulling his mouth into a strange batrachian grimace of self-reproach. 'I possibly shouldn't have said that,' he said. There was an awkward pause. The maitre d' shouted at a waiter. 'I thought she would have told you. I thought girls talk about these things.'

'She told me she went travelling after she broke up with Quintin Hays.'

'Well, she did, in a way. The clinic was in France.'

'France? Not Spain?'

'No, it was definitely in France.'

'So when did she go to India?'

'India? I never heard anything about India.'

'And Spain? Did she go there?'

'I'm not sure. She may have.'

'But definitely not India?'

'I suppose it's possible she went to India.'

'How can you not know?' In Mia's family, it was rare for one member to go as far as the corner café without all the others being briefed.

'I wasn't in touch with her much around then. We didn't get on.'

'But in all the time since then, you've never discussed it?'

'I don't bring up that year if I can help it.'

No wonder Fillette objected to the word 'clinic' so strongly, Mia thought. 'So... you don't know for a fact that she didn't go to India?'

'No, I don't know for a fact. Why does it matter?'

'It doesn't.' It didn't matter, exactly, but her mind had conjured it so vividly on Fillette's behalf. *Fillette in India*, like *Tintin in Tibet*, or *Alice in Wonderland*. It was a key component of her idea of Fillette, and, she had thought, a key component of Fillette's idea of herself.

I woke up one morning and decided I didn't want to be thin for a living, Mia replayed in her head, and was struck by an image of Fillette waking up in a white bed with a French nurse who looked like Audrey Tatou putting an IV in her arm.

The maitre d' arrived at their table and inquired after Sebastian's steak. Sebastian told him it was doing terrifically, and inquired in turn after the maitre d's new view. The maitre d' glowered through the window at the great black building, then placed both his elbows on the table and spoke into Sebastian's shoulder.

'They try to buy us out,' he hissed. 'But I'm not budge. My father come here with twenty pound in his pocket.'

'Really, now,' said Sebastian.

'They're trying to rezoning. I know.'

'Who? Victor Adamus?'

'Adamus. Yes. Them.'

'No room for the little man, eh?'

'No fucking room, my friend.'

'This is why I worry,' said Sebastian when he had left. 'Don't think me heartless. But since R.V.A. Junior re-entered the picture, she's beginning to act that way again. Fillette.'

On his next visit, he brought her lunch in a paper bag.

He was out of work ('resting'), and appeared to have nothing better to do than arrange himself in her vicinity and thrill to the sound of his own voice ('keep her company').

He was quite capable of playing both straight man and foil, and when necessary, could do a fair turn as his own peanut gallery as well. All that was required of Mia to keep up her end of the conversation was to be present: she was not so much an interlocutor as she was an audience, and she was not so much an audience as she was an excuse. Often she would become immersed in some detail of her work, and surface many minutes later, like a cetacean drawing breath, to find him still in mid-autologue.

She was under no illusions as to his intentions, but she was content to abide him as long as he did not press his suit. It was better than being alone. In fact, from that perspective, they made a perfect team. She was seldom in the right frame of mind to talk, and he was seldom in the right frame of mind to listen.

'Mia? Are you listening?'

'Watsegoed?'

'I said when are you going to paint me?' He was sitting cross-legged on the mezzanine, just outside the entrance to Room Three, with the skirts of his highwayman's coat hanging down behind into space.

'When you learn how to be still for two hours at a stretch,' said Mia.

'I can be still.'

'I meant your mouth.'

'Hm,' said Sebastian, as if his lips had at that very moment been glued together.

Mia laughed. 'I'll think about it. When this is done.'

She had, in fact, done substantially more than just think about it already.

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Since the gallery commission, Mia was not painting less in her own time, as she had expected, but more. The prospect of an actual professional career in the immediate offing had motivated her. As Matt's exams drew near, she had started coming home after work again. At six in the evening, or whenever she was satisfied with her progress on the mural, she would take off the painting clothes she kept at the gallery, pack up and store her equipment, put on the clothes she had worn to Knightsbridge that day, travel home, get into the painting clothes she had at home, pack out her Tooting equipment, sit down at her easel and begin work.

She was scrupulous about using paints and even tools that she had purchased with her own money (and the sable brushes Matt had bought her for Christmas) for her own work, and those that Victor had supplied her with for the mural.

The painting of Sebastian was still in the early stages. She was toying with two compositions, and had drawn studies for both; Bottom and Puck together, in the moment of metamorphosis, and Puck alone, as she had seen him there on the stage, in the moment that he had caught her in that levelling glance. She hadn't needed him to pose for so much as even a photograph, though. Her mind had captured him once already, in an intensity of detail that only equivalent intensity of emotion could etch so indelibly in the memory.

She had intended at first to depict Bottom as a donkey, so that the painting would at least make some sort of sense to other people, but in sketch after sketch the donkey-face came out looking goatish, and she kept unintentionally adding horns. The original memory would not leave her, nor make itself amenable to creative licence, and eventually she capitulated.

At the moment, she was not painting, but reading an email from Cassie, with much amusement. Helena had, magnanimously, given Mia custody of the computer, having decided to buy a laptop wherever she ended up, which, if all went to plan, would be South Korea.

*Blah blah blah Lucas and Justin, blah blah blah Justin and Lucas*, thought Mia. Susannah this. Rex that. The Carmichaels the other. Cassie was having a high old time of it. She was also, undeniably, and inconceivably, gossiping like a Jo'burg kugel.

'Wat *lag jy?*' said Helena from the doorway to her bedroom.

'Cassie sent me an email full of *skinner*.'

Helena laughed. 'Good for her. What's she up to?'

'She's a *barlady*.'

'*Jy jok*.'

'And I think she's got a crush on her step-brother.'

'A crush?'

The fact of a crush, they both knew, was bigger news than the object of the crush, however unconventional.

'She keeps misdirecting. Running his name together with other people's.'

'It's all good. Keep it in the family,' said Helena.

Mia turned in her chair and spotted the official-looking documents in Helena's hand. 'What are those?'

'From the teaching institute. Application forms.'

Helena was leaving soon for the East, to teach English. Their lease in Tooting would run out on the 15<sup>th</sup> of August, and Mia, to her own thrilled ambivalence and Helena's endless relief, was finally all set to take up lodgings with Matt in a two bedroom townhouse in Angel.

'I came to get your two cents... what would you say is the difference between 'I run away' and 'I am running away?'

'It's a *whatsisname*, isn't it? A participle,' said Mia. 'The second one.'

'No, yes, but I have to explain how the *meaning* is different.'

'Oh. Well, in the first one, you run, and in the second one, you are running.'

'Of course. It's obvious, once you think about it.'

'Tell you what, I'll put the question in my reply to Cass.'

'Don't bother, there's not enough time. I have to send these off tomorrow,' said Helena, casting about in vain for a place to sit.

Mia had finally relented to Helena's exasperated complaints that there was now not a single surface in the kitchen that wasn't covered in paintbrushes, paint tubes, or actual paint. She had done the Fool canvas in her room, and for this cause all her stuff had been transported upstairs.

Such 'cards' as she had completed thus far were propped against the wall, with their backs to the room, and every piece of furniture, including the bed, was covered in various types of paper on which she had drawn, was drawing, or would later draw studies for the rest.

Giving up on sitting down, Helena picked up one of the sketchpads and started leafing through it, strolling over to lean against Mia's desk as she did so. She paused over one page, raising an eyebrow. 'Is this your new crest, or something?' she said.

Helena was looking at a drawing of Bottom.

The creature had proved wilful in other ways. Mia had taken a break from her self-imposed Tarot schedule to toy with *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but of its own accord, the donkey-goat had become the subject for the Devil card. It was a study for this that had caught Helena's attention.

Mia snatched the pad from her sister's hands with a suddenness that made Helena look at her askance. 'I don't like people seeing my stuff before it's finished, you know that,' said Mia with a forced giggle which came out as a whinny.

'Why did you write 'The De Vos' under that minotaur thing? Is *that* your name now, like The Rock, or The Edge?' All the humour had left her voice; the words delivered in a biting deadpan Mia recognised as having been learned under the tongue of Sonya.

Helena had been less than supportive about Mia's decision to go by their mother's name. Her disapproval was a mystery to Mia.

Their mother, who had entered, and become well-known in, the published world of academia as Inneke de Villiers, had been obliged for her entire professional life to use the name of a man to whom she owed precisely nothing. Mia, in her own way, was making up for it.

'It's your *name*,' Helena had said.

'It's *his* name.'

'Well, he's our *father*.'

'And I'm *me*.'

'It's our family.'

'It's a *statement*.'

'Ooh, we must be the Different and Special child!'

'*Dis belaglik*,' said Mia, and meant it. She was anything but the special child. Practically from birth, she had been accustomed to being known by everyone in town as either 'Sonya's sister' or 'Helena's sister'. Not to mention 'Inneke's third,' the one who was neither a notorious rebel, nor a linguistic *wunderkind*, nor showing signs of becoming a devastating beauty. What was wrong with wanting to be her own person, here in her own city?

Matt had suggested she double-barrel it: Mia De Vos-De Villiers. (De Vos-De Villiers-Fletcher, he had sounded out in the privacy of his own head.)

Cassie had pointed out (by email) that it was useful that she wouldn't have to replace any of her monogrammed handkerchiefs.

'I like the way it sounds, anyway,' Mia had said to Helena.

'What kind of a reason is that to change your name?' Helena had said.

So it had continued, and was continuing now. 'Rather an elaborate font, though,' Helena said. 'You'll take forever to sign autographs.'

'It doesn't say De Vos,' said Mia, and looked at the sketch, where, only after a solid five seconds of staring, she noticed that where she had intended to write, where she was sure she *had* written, THE DEVIL, she had, in fact, written THE DEVOS. 'Oh geeze, how about that,' said Mia. The obdurate Bottom had played yet another Puckish trick on her. She had pored over this drawing for at least two hours without noticing her mistake.

'It's supposed to say The Devil,' said Mia. 'It's quite funny, really.' It was that psychological phenomenon, that made you count the wrong number of F's in a certain sentence, or rendered you unable to see coffee pots or your lover's faults. Sclerosis, schematic, something.

'You're freaking me out a bit, Mia,' said Helena. 'That thing you drew is exceedingly creepy.'

'No, you see, I've been replacing De Villiers with De Vos in my head whenever I think of anything to do with art. I did it automatically. I just didn't see it.' Sarcoma. Sfumato.

'Why were you drawing the devil?'

'Scotoma,' said Mia. 'It's psychological scotoma. I had a blind spot against it.'

'Why were you drawing the devil?' repeated Helena.

There was no more innocent explanation than the truth. 'It's a tarot card,' said Mia. 'That's what all those are for.' She indicated the five canvas panels which stood leaning by her cupboard. 'I'm making a deck.'

'Tarot?' said Helena.

'Yep. There's always a Devil card.'

Helena paused, tried to smile. 'Mia,' she said. 'Are you dabbling?'

This would once have been funny and almost was now. Their father had caught Sonya and some of their older cousins playing Glassy Glassy (with one of their grandfather's French Baccarat cut crystal whisky tumblers, no less), in the attic at the home of their grandparents De Villiers one summer during the Christmas holidays. There had been hidings; the only hidings ever administered to their generation not by their own parents, but much worse, by their grandfather. Sonya, as the eldest and chief instigator, received the worst: a *pak slae* of a nature the thirteen-year-old was unaccustomed to and really much too old for. Sonya had set about restoring her devastated pride and her status as chief of the grandchildren by an underground lampooning campaign, which hinged largely on her doing impressions of his tirade, in her grandfather's accent and an attempt at his lexicon, which were both so refined that his Afrikaans bordered on Dutch. 'Thou shalt not dabble!' she had boomed. 'Cut crystal is the vessel of Satan!'

'It's art,' said Mia.



Helena looked at her once more, then dropped her eyes back to her application forms, nodding, giving herself permission not to worry, for now.

'Have you applied in Japan?' said Mia, hoping to change the subject.

'No,' said Helena. 'Why?'

'Victor says Japan is more interesting than Korea.'

So it's 'Victor' now, thought Helena.

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For some reason it was twilight, or not quite. Dusk.

Having thought it in English, Mia had sudden cause to wonder whether this incidental assumption she had made her entire English-speaking life – that dusk came before twilight – might be unfounded, that it might be the other way round, or that they might actually be different words for the same thing, and if so, whether it was only because the word ‘twilight’ had more of a dark blue sound to it, and dusk more of a grey sound, that she had thought otherwise.

At any rate, for some reason it was that time of day in the mural. No doubt about it; she had painted air of the kind that makes one start thinking about putting on something with sleeves. There was no accounting for it. Mia had used a warm wash, and had proceeded with every intention of painting a mid-afternoon landscape from the inside.

It was probably the result of working by inconsistent light herself, she thought. Mia frequently worked from early in the morning until well after hours as time slipped away and her deadline loomed. She sighed. It wasn’t displeasing, and she didn’t really have the leisure to change it. What difference did it make, after all, if three hours of forest-time had elapsed between her original vision and the final product?

She hoped Victor would be happy with the changes.

Of course he would, she thought. He would be happy with it as long as she was happy with it.

The thought reminded Mia of the argument she had had with Helena yesterday, and made her wonder, not for the first time, if Helena had a point. Not that she had any intention of letting Helena know that. That morning Mia had made very sure her sister knew she was not yet forgiven. They had hardly exchanged two words over breakfast.

And it had all started because she said Victor recommended Japan over Korea. Or at least, that was how it had come up. Mia was pretty sure Helena had been meaning to dig in this particular trough for some time.

‘This Victor of yours,’ Helena had said. ‘Where are his people from?’

*Where are his people from*, she scoffed to herself. You can take the *meisie* out of the Boland, but you can’t take the Boland out of the *meisie*. Had Helena not yet picked up that when you asked people in London where they were from, they answered in postal codes?

Although, come to that, Mia didn’t know where his people came from. She didn’t even know where he lived.

‘Where does his money come from?’ said Helena.

‘Property, I told you. What is this interrogation all about?’

‘I’m just concerned. How much do you really know about him?’

‘What do I need to know?’ Mia had said. ‘I’m working for him, not dating him. It’s none of my business.’

It was none of Mia's business how Victor voted, or how he had done at Oxford, or how many generations his people had been in England, or which trouser leg he put on first in the mornings. It was not her business to know how Victor fit into the daylight scheme of things.

Of course, Helena had said, it was wonderful that Mia had been given the chance, out of the blue, to start a real career. But it did seem rather, well, out of the blue. 'I've just wondered once or twice...'

'Yes?'

'I mean, do you have any idea why he gave you the project?'

'No, no idea at all,' Mia answered. 'It's a complete mystery. Why should he be interested in someone without any obvious talent?'

'Mia. That's *not* what I meant.'

Her viciousness was empty; she had asked herself the same thing.

The slices of real sky visible through the studio windows were neither blue nor grey. They were strips of livid, undead black between the strips of white wall. She had no idea how much time had passed this evening since she had started working by electric light. Perhaps she would stay at Matt's tonight after all, she thought.

Downstairs, she heard the buzzer ting, and she waited a minute or two, unsure whether the night security had arrived yet or not. A moment later she heard a male voice, and went out onto the skywalk.

'No, there's no one else here, mate,' said the security guard. 'Sorry.'

'Is someone asking for me?' said Mia. The security guard started violently and looked up.

'Christ,' he said. 'I thought the place was empty.'

'Sorry. I work in Room Three.' She had not seen him before, he must be new.

'Is your name Mia, Miss?'

'Yes, that's me,' said Mia, coming down. She joined the guard at the screen.

Sebastian was at the security door with what appeared to be Demetrius at his elbow.

'What are you doing here?' she said into the intercom.

'Carol singing,' said Sebastian.

'In April?'

'Ha ha! April Fool's.'

'Oh ha ha ha.'

'Are you going to let us in?'

'I haven't decided yet.'

'Well why don't you come out, then.'

'What for?'

'We've come to kidnap you. We're going out.'

'I have to work.'

'No, you don't.'

'Yes I do.'

'No, you don't,' said Demetrius.

Mia thought it might not be a bad idea to pack it in. But that didn't mean she could go out on the town. 'I'm tired,' she said. 'And I'm not dressed for going out. I'm covered in paint.'

'Have a look in the corner of your studio,' said Sebastian. 'You'll find a backpack with the clothes you wore to work today in it.'

'Damn,' said Mia. He knew her schedule.

'Come on. There's a car full of people waiting for us.'

Mia was squeezed in between the massive Demetrius, whose name she eventually remembered to be Charles, and Bottom, who she found she could still not look in the eye. The Changeling Child, who was called Jamie Lamington, was obliged to sit on Hippolyta's lap.

Out of costume, Jamie Lamington looked like Oliver Twist. His please-sir-I-want-some-more eyes wanted some more of something a little less wholesome than gruel, his mouth was a little too churlish, not stoic enough, but for all that the resemblance was so strong that Mia felt compelled to remark on it (to Sebastian, when they were on foot again). In this way she learned that he had, in fact, played the orphan in a Blue Peter Christmas Special when he was shorter, but for reasons which were not adequately explained, everyone referred to him as Boy.

'So where are we going?' said Mia.

'Not sure. Bitsy, is that das blonde Biest on the line?'

Hippolyta was on a mobile phone in front. 'They're at Sirroco.'

They found Dane in a booth at the back of the club, sitting at the head of the drinks table with his fingers steepled, as if at a board meeting.

'You!' he said, pointing a peremptory finger at Sebastian. 'You have brought dishonour upon this company.'

His friends, amongst whom Mia recognised Peaseblossom, Moth, and Hermia, were lounging on the booth seats, and had evidently been appreciating the preamble to this accusation for some time. They burst into laughter when they saw Sebastian's face.

'What have I done now?' said Sebastian.

'How long did you think you could hide it from me?' said Dane. 'Your sister, Sebastian, is *consorting* with R.V.A. Beta.'

'Ah. I am undone,' said Sebastian, sitting down on top of Moth, who squealed and demanded that he get off it. 'Who spilled the beans?'

'That!' said Dane, 'Is not for you to know. Now. Sebastian, what do you propose to do about this?'

'What can I bloody do about it? I'm not her father.'

'But *he* might as well be,' said Peaseblossom.

'Apparently he's getting a nice chunk of the East End rezoned,' said Charles. Dane levelled his gaze on Sebastian as if he had just cemented his point. 'Where will it end?' he said.

'Look,' said Sebastian. 'This is guilt by association. If you're going to pick on someone, pick on Mia. She's in his employ.'

'Dane turned the gaze on Mia, and left it there. 'Is that so?'

'I'm not in his employ,' said Mia. 'He commissioned me for one project.'

'I'm bored to death of Rudolph bloody Adamus,' said Sebastian. 'I have to hear about him all day from my sister as it is. Let's talk about something else.' He moved up to make room for Mia.

'What are we not talking about?' said Lysander, arriving at the table with a tray of shots.

'Victor Adamus,' said Sebastian.

'Oh. Hear, hear.'

'What kind of a name is Adamus, anyway?' said Mia. 'Where are his people from?'

'Oh, his *people* are from far away,' said Sebastian. 'Far, far away.'

'Stop him,' said Charles, without much interest. 'Somebody.'

'You ask where will it end,' said Sebastian. 'I ask, where did it *begin*? You ask, how does he get away with it? I say, it's all perfectly obvious. Rudolph Victor Adamus, like his sire before him, is Annunaki.'

'What?' said Mia.

'For God's sake, don't encourage him,' said Charles.

'What's an Annaki?' said Mia. 'Is that like, the freemasons, or something?'

'Much worse.'

'The Illuminati?'

'The Annunaki, Minnie Mouse,' said Sebastian, 'are a race of shapeshifting reptoids, that is, green lizardlike extra-terrestrials from the fourth dimension – between seven and twelve feet tall, depending on who you ask – who corrupted human DNA, created black people, are responsible for the Gulf War and the death of the Princess of Wales, and, for good measure, have run the entire world since civilisation began.'

'Sebastian, you've topped yourself,' said Mia. 'That is some quality bulldust right there.'

'Thank you, but I can't honourably claim the credit. We have the truth of this from former Coventry City goalkeeper and self-proclaimed Son of God, David Icke.'

'Then David Icke has topped you.'

'Ah, is that so, Miss Mia De Villiers. If that *is* your name.' With impressive alacrity he rearranged her name into 'I, A Slimier Devil', and 'Evil's Mild Era', and 'A Vile Slider Am I', and lighting a cigarette, said, 'Dare we speak freely? How do we know you're not a lizard mole?'

Dane was still looking at her. He was smiling, now. 'I see I am surrounded by turncoats and sellouts,' he said. He handed her the first shot from the tray.

Hippolyta, whose off-stage name Mia had discovered to be Ginger, stroked her hair and said, 'She's not a reptoid. Look at her, she's a little water sprite. If only we'd met her before, Dane, you might have cast her as a fairy.'

Mia looked at the small glass of green liquid she had been given. 'Is it Apple Sourz?' she said.

'It's Absinthe,' said Lysander.

'The real thing?' said Bitsy, the stage manager, taking another shot glass. 'I bet it's Absinth without the 'e'.'

'There's plenty of 'e' in this absinthe, dear girl. They keep it under the counter.'

Despite having adopted it as her handle, Mia had never tasted it. Dane, now reclining in his seat with his arms across the back of the booth, watched her as she downed it. 'Have another,' he said.

He turned his heroic face thoughtfully towards the flatscreen TV that overhung the bar, showing a football match with the sound turned down. He reminded her of someone, she suddenly realised. She ran through her memory for records of other formidable blond acquaintances, but came up with nothing.

'Did you hear about Will Young?' he said to Sebastian.

Sebastian was staring fixedly at a girl on the dance floor. 'Oh yes, that's old news. More power to him.'

'No, not that he's a poof. He's here. Allegedly.'

'Is Dane a poof?' said Mia in Sebastian's ear.

'No, he's mannered. Have a look at this chica, she's on a loop.'

'Eh?'

'Watch.' The girl had noticed Sebastian watching her, and was sucking in her stomach and arching her back a little to make her breasts stick out. 'Watch, watch,' said Sebastian. 'It's about to repeat. And one and two and *shimmy* and *flounce* and REPEAT!' Mia watched.

'I don't see it.'

'It's about six minutes, you have to look carefully.' The girl, noting his intensified regard and misinterpreting it, now performed a sexed up version of her suspected routine. She glanced at him and he hooded his eyes. She whispered something to her friend.

'Want to dance?' Sebastian said to Mia, without moving his gaze from the dance floor.

'So you can spade that chick?'

'Spade?'

'Crack onto'

'Yes.'

'Oh.'

'Got a problem with that?'

'Yes, I'm super jealous, can't you tell,' and to put her money where her smart mouth was she rose and preceded him to the dance floor, to which some of their party had already migrated.

She could dance well, she remembered, and they were playing a pretty classy remix of the Everly Brothers' *All I Have to Do is Dream* that Mia hadn't heard before. 'This is pretty classy,' she said to Sebastian, who was not beside her. She looked around, but three quarters of her field of vision was obscured by Charles, who was standing with both feet planted like the Colossus of Rhodes and moving his head slowly from side to side. At the sound of her voice, he turned his head towards her, along two axes, to the side, and down. His eyes, all-pupil, were glittery black, like malachite. 'You're very small,' he said angrily.

'Perhaps I'm just very far away,' said Mia.

Charles's eyes stretched. Mia smiled, but Charles did not. Jamie Lamington was on the other side of her. She turned and gave the smile to him instead. 'This is a pretty classy remix,' she said.

'You like Ludovico?' said Jamie Lamington. His curls were plastered to his ears with sweat.

'Yeh,' said Mia, past the rush and bubble in her ears. 'Have you heard his new one?'

'His new one?' Jamie Lamington laughed. 'Ludovico isn't a person, Minnie Mouse. 'It's two people. Three if you count the producer, who's –' He was speaking loudly so that Charles would hear and join the good clean fun to be had out of Mia's ignorance. But Charles was staring up at the balcony, where what might or might not have been the backside of Will Young could be seen supporting its owner against the balustrade.

'Don't call me that,' she said.

'You don't like it?' he was still speaking too loudly, to make it less obvious that he had been doing so just to make her the butt of the joke earlier.

Studying Jamie Lamington, Mia was reminded of the words of the biology lecturer who had taken the art students for anatomy at Stellenbosch in second year. Besides being memorable for a chronic Freudian slip athwart the word 'organism', he had given them a piece of information she had never forgotten: he had said that there is a certain ratio of eye size to forehead size to chin size that in all mammals, especially female mammals, stimulates a nurturing response; that this is why people find puppies and kittens as appealing as their own young, and that this is why a female lion will raise a baby oryx or a dog will play wet-nurse for a tiger cub. Despite being clear of his teens, Jamie Lamington had never outgrown this ratio, and he drew this response, even from Mia, coupled with a sort of inchoate caveat: *deceptive packaging*.

'I don't like it when you do it,' said Mia.

'Ohhhh, I seeee,' said Jamie Lamington. His soft dewy mouth hung open as if expecting the next mouthful of puréed vegetables. She didn't know if she wanted to slap him or burp him. He leaned close, and now he was speaking too loud right in her ear. 'But you like it when *he* does it, don't you.'

'He?' said Mia.

'Don't be coy,' said Jamie Lamington. 'It's not your style.' It was a Sebastian remark, and he was attempting a Sebastian look, trying to smirk at her sleepily, but there was a cruel edge there which

was not lost on her. It reminded her of high school. Not high school boys. High school girls. When they liked the same high school boy you liked.

The rushing noise was louder in her head. Several men on the dance-floor were staring at her. Sebastian wasn't, she noticed. Sebastian wasn't there. She looked around for Sebastian. Where had Sebastian gone? Sebastian was at the bar, again, with the loop girl, but he wasn't looking at the loop girl. He was looking at Mia. With his eyes hooded. Mia arched her back a little to make her breasts jut out.

From inside her handbag, Mia felt her phone vibrate. She scrabbled for it. Matt.

'Hey!' she shouted.

'What's all that noise?' said Matt. 'Is there a party at the gallery?'

'Um. I'm not at the gallery. I'm in Soho.'

'Say again?'

'I'm in Soho.'

'What are you doing in Soho?'

'Dancing.'

'Oh.'

'I would have invited you, only I knew you were studying.'

'Sorry?'

'I said I *knew* you were *studying*!'

'I never said I wasn't studying.'

'I, oh, for goodness' sake -'

'How are you getting home?'

'I've got a lift.' She assumed.

'Oh. Right.'

'It's just Fillette's brother and his pals,' said Mia, although he hadn't asked. 'It's kind of impossible to talk in here.' One of the men who had been staring at her was beginning to make his way across the dancefloor.

'We're out of time.'

'What? What did you say?'

'I said *have a good time*,' he shouted.

'Oh. Okay. Thanks. Study hard.' The staring guy was now approaching.

'I am.'

'Bye.'

'Mia? I love you.'

'What?' She had heard him fine, this time.

'I love you.'

'You too.'



Mia pretended she didn't notice the approaching man until he was right beside her, although by the time he was about four sweaty bodies away, she had realised from the self-assured way he propelled himself through the crowd towards her that he knew her, or thought he did. He did look a little familiar.

'*Nou toe nou. Miatjie de Villiers!*' he said.

Stellenbosch. She thought she did remember. He was called Os or Spies or Kwas or something, some nickname. He had been the Stellenbosch loose forward in her second year. His name was...

'Frans Visagie.'

Vis. That was it, they had called him Vis.

Sebastian was looking at him sidelong. Vis was very drunk. He had already curled a hand all the way round her back and onto her stomach. 'Come on,' he said generically. He noticed Sebastian looking at his hand and leaped to a conclusion. 'What, you're not open for business anymore?' he said to Mia, and laughed. To Sebastian he said, 'watch out, bru, she bites.'

Had she? She hadn't, had she?

She looked at Sebastian, waiting for him to defend her. He was looking on with the indulgent anticipation of a parent at a ballet recital. He saw Mia's stony gaze and made a token effort to stop smiling. An image came to her: that the club floor on which they were standing and through which the bass was reverberating was paper thin, and brittle, that if she lifted her foot and brought it down it would crack like the shell on crème brulee, and that underneath there was nothing. Not even space, just nothing. Dark matter. Quintessence.

The rushing in her ears came back, and this time she could feel it as well as hear it. It felt like a Boeing was taking off from inside the hangar of her skull with The Everly Brothers and both members of Ludovico, three if you count the producer, on board. Sebastian was smiling again, free of her eyes. He was whispering something to Charles.

All I have to do is dream dream dream dreamdreamdreamdream. Mia closed her eyes and saw a great black door, this time ajar. She opened them again, realising how very likely she was to fall over if she didn't. Sebastian was next to her.

'Seb,' said Mia.

'Don't stumble,' he said, taking hold of her by the ponytail. 'They'll kick you out.'

'Sebastian.'

'What?'

'I need to get out of here.'

He gave a staccato sigh. 'All right. We can go outside.'

They went up some stairs and out onto the balcony. Sebastian offered Mia a cigarette. She declined.

'What's up?' said Sebastian impatiently, staring through the plate glass at the dance floor below.

'I think Dane put something in the absinthe.'

'Er, the absinthe *is* the something in the absinthe, Mia.'

She looked out over Soho. Soho tilted and flattened itself out. Sebastian smoked.

'So do you really bite?' said Sebastian.

'You didn't help me, much, in there,' she said. 'In fact, you didn't do anything at all.' It was a risk to challenge him. He might just leave without her. He might do anything. Who was he anyway? Some rich kid.

'What did you want me to do?' said Sebastian. 'Slap him through the face with my riding glove?'

'Might have been nice.'

'Besides, it's not true that I did nothing.'

'What did you do?'

'I told Charles he was interested.'

'You didn't.'

'Have a look.' He gestured with his head towards the plate glass. Mia didn't look.

'That might not have been a good idea,' said Mia. 'That guy is from Stellenbosch.'

'So?'

'He's more than likely to get physical.'

'More or less what I led Charles to believe,' said Sebastian. 'Don't worry, Mia. Have you seen Charles?'

Mia had to admit that she had. 'That was a mean trick,' she said softly.

'What do you care? He's obviously a wanker.'

'It was a mean trick to play on *Charles*.'

'Oh,' said Sebastian. 'It was all in the name of fun.'

All in the name of fun. *Had* she? He had definitely looked familiar. Perhaps in second year.

The fresh air was helping, her head was almost clear. 'It was very stuffy in there.'

They could hear the bass line pumping muffled through the plate glass, making the windows drone. The song was cross-fading into something else, now. 'Basement Jaxx,' said Mia, talismanically.

'Yeah,' said Sebastian, watching through the window with his lip twitching as Charles towered amorously over Frans Visagie. 'Have you heard his new one?' Mia did not meet his eyes, which she knew would be hooded and glinting and bored.

*All experience is good experience*, thought Mia. She looked out at London and did not recognise it. She looked at Sebastian and realised she hardly knew him at all. *These are not your people*.

'Why did you bring me here?'

He frowned, still looking through the window. 'Relax,' was all he said.

*This is not your place.* 'I want to go home,' she said to herself.

'What, right now?'

She had been thinking of Stellenbosch, but she said, 'Yes.'

Sebastian was still looking through the plate glass. He sighed again.

'Why are you being such a wet blanket?'

'Please.'

On his face, or in the reflection of it which was visible to her, she now saw a different expression begin to cloud his exasperation, the querulous frown moving to his mouth. *Off with her head.*

'Just stick around,' he said. 'Nobody feels like going yet.'

'I'm going,' said Mia. 'I'll take a night bus.'

'To Tooting?'

'I'll go to Matt's.' He would be asleep, but she could wake him.

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Mia flipped onto her knees and reached forward to take the object in Sam's hand. '*Ag my moeder,*' she said, turning it over and over between her finger tips to look at it from all sides. Dextrous hands. He had fashioned the wire top of the champagne bottle into a little creature. A turtle. The wire clasps he had bent to form four little legs, a head and a tail, with the convex side of the lid forming its shell.

'It's a champagne turtle,' he said. 'It's good luck.'

'But you made it,' said Mia, smiling and frowning at the same time.

'So what?'

'You can't make things that are good luck.'

'Why not?'

'You just can't. You have to stumble upon them. Like four-leaf clovers, or... or shooting stars. That's the whole point; it's by luck that you come across them.'

'I don't believe that,' said Sam. 'I've always made my own luck.'

'That doesn't make any sense.'

'Who cares, if it works?' He put out his hand. 'If you don't want it, I'll take it back.'

Mia drew her hand away from him. 'I want it,' she said.

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Where are you?

What?

Concentrate.

Concentrate. A raggedly whispered order, his first in six months. To honour and obey, to spite, to show him up, to prove him wrong, she finished within the next minute.

And he so tired these days, she knew he had only approached her for what he assumed to be her sake. Not too long ago he would have been right. She had made such a fuss and sulk over the one occasion on which she had been forced to ask him outright that he had been cowed into making sure she never had reason to ask again. When she knew she has cowed him into lust, how could she be expected to concentrate?

How could he?

She had kissed his neck until he rolled over and began tugging at her clothes. Please don't make me, had been the first thing she said to him.

What? said Matt.

She is wearied of containing multitudes. Nothing. I didn't say anything.

What a thing to say, said Matt.

I do want to.

What a thing to say.

She kissed him again and again, she told him she had meant nothing by it, that she meant nothing.

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## Full Strawberry Moon

By June, the building crew, the Great Architect and the Intelligent Designer had moved on to the second site across the plaza. They, like Mia, were running out of time, but while Victor had doubled the manpower on the building work, all Mia could do was redouble her efforts.

The weather was already sweltering, and the Adamus Gallery, with its large black surfaces, made the most of it. Upstairs in Room Three it was particularly oppressive, especially now with the windows blacked out once more. The air-conditioning had not yet been installed.

Lying back on the still untiled floor with her face directed towards the ineffectual redistribution of heat created by the fan she had brought with her, Mia listened to the jackhammering of the jackhammers and the primordial roar of the Caterpillar through the glass, and thought about Chantal Flick.

At some point, the sporadic reiki training sessions had become a series of long conversations. And at some point, they had become, well, not friends, precisely, but certainly not people who hated each other. They even laughed about having hated each other, although they didn't call it that.

'I thought you were such a pretentious little brown-noser,' said Chantal with a peal of rich laughter.

Mia laughed at what a pretentious little brown-noser Chantal had thought she was.

That day, as they locked up the Studio, Chantal had even extended Mia an invitation.

'Mrs. Ambleside has asked if you'd like to come to a little gathering she's holding this month,' she had said.

'Me?'

'Yes, you.'

'She remembers me?'

'Vividly. It's a garden party, on the thirteenth. I hope you'll come.'

The thirteenth of June. Full moon. Mia could hardly believe it. If a Book Club was an experiment in Astral Projection in this gratuitous espionage-like jargon, what might a Garden Party not be? Ritual sacrifice? Hieros Gamos? Why did they bother with the secret codes or the euphemisms or whatnot? The law and even fashion was on their side. They might as well call it an Esbat and be done with it.

'I'll try and make it,' said Mia.

She had not yet RSVP'd.

Despite her indignation at Helena's faithless questions about the gallery commission, Mia had to admit that it was beginning to vex her, the way every second person she met in London seemed so hell bent on taking her under their wings.

Against her better judgement, she had sought Helena's advice.

Helena looked at her long and steadily. 'Mia,' she said. 'What have you gone and gotten yourself mixed up with?'

'What? What's the problem?' said Mia.

'Liewe Jesus, Mia,' said Helena in their mother's *iemand-gaan-nou-huil* voice. 'Wicca? Haven't you taken this Alternative thing of yours far enough already?'

'Huh?'

'You with your yoga and your aromatherapy and your tarot and your reiki. And...'

'And what?'

'Well, the way you *talk* these days,' said Helena. 'And the way you dress.'

'What's wrong with the way I dress?'

'It's just, it's not you,' said Helena. 'It's like you're not here anymore. Who do you think you're trying to fool?'

'What?' said Mia, stung. 'I'm not trying to fool anyone.'

'First you wanted to be Fillette. Now you seem to be trying to turn yourself into this Chantal person. Why can't you just be yourself?'

'That's the biggest load of rubbish you've ever come out with, Helena.' She didn't even *like* Chantal. 'What do you think we're going to do, ritual sacrifice? It's just a bunch of perfectly nice ladies.'

'You are *not* going to that woman's house,' said Helena.

'*Hou op maak asof jy Ma is*,' Mia threw back.

Helena's eyes glinted as if she had seized upon something. 'I can do whatever I like,' said Mia, switching back to English.

'Please, Mia,' said Helena, coming closer and putting her hands on Mia's shoulders. 'Just take my advice. This is not the way to deal with it.'

'Not the way to deal with what?'

'I don't know. Pain. Guilt. Grief. Whatever it you're going through, or avoiding going through, this is not the way. Talk to us. We are here. We will -'

'Us? Us who? What are you *talking* about?'

'Me! Matt. Ma. Cassie, for God's sake. We want to help you.'

'With what?' Mia had said. 'There's nothing wrong with me.'

Helena's reaction had irked her beyond measure. It had also surprised her. She knew that her sister had disapproved, vaguely, for a long time of the way she was running her life, and also that she,

Helena, probably knew she was overreacting. She was leaving for South Korea soon, and knew she would have no further chance to influence Mia. For her the conversation had served as an opportunity to vent all her amorphous, groundless fears. But pain? Guilt? Grief?

Helena, it emerged, had found Fillette's copy of *Beyond Beyond*.

'Is that what this is all about?' said Mia. 'A book? Just because it's a book about grief, and I want to talk to the author, it has to mean I'm having some sort of a crisis about Sam's death?'

'This is not about a book,' said Helena. 'I'm not sure it's about Sam's death, either. You haven't been listening to anything I've said.'

'It doesn't seem to me as if you've said anything worth listening to.'

Mia had half a mind to go to the garden party just to spite her, now. But the main reason for her hesitation was still a factor: Fillette had not been invited to Anne Ambleside's party.

She rolled over onto her stomach and hiked herself up on her elbows.

'Sebastian.'

'So at every possible instant there are all these parallel universes springing into being, infinitely, yeh, and at the same time collapsing, as every step we take, or don't take, every word we choose, every *thought* we entertain, for that matter, causes millions upon millions of potential futures to be shut down, and at the same time, causes millions of others to spring into being. Or could-being. Now, what if, right, that *moment*, as I was saying, right in the middle of some terrible balls-up you've made, when you have that sense not only that you wish the past were retrievable, but that it *is* still retrievable, that instant when it seems that it just can't be the case that your last chance to *not* have totalled your car, or forgotten your lines, or dropped your baby, has come and gone – now, what if that is our sole experience of the multiverse? What if there's a part of our brains that can tap –'

'Sebastian!'

He had been making loosely illustrative shadow puppets in the overhead projector as he spoke. Mia, then kneeling, had been listening with half an ear, one eye shut, the other locked on the mural. She was trying to separate the new charcoal lines and the old paintstrokes in her mind's eye.

After two week's worth of denial, anger, and depression, she had finally accepted that the perspective was indeed off on three out of the five foreshortened branches that were supposed to advance towards the viewer. Capitulating, she had redone her transparencies, set up the projector again, and today she had enlisted Sebastian's help in blacking out the windows all over again.

'What?'

'How do you think Fillette would feel if I were to attend an... event hosted by Anne Ambleside? Do you think she would mind?'

'Mind? No, I don't see why.'

'Oh good,' said Mia. 'I was worried that she might feel she had been slighted.'

'You mean she wasn't invited?'

'I don't think so, no.'

'In that case, she'd be jealous as hellfire.'

'Oh, great,' said Mia, dropping her pencil.

Chantal had been somewhat more direct about Fillette not being invited than Mia was letting on. She had asked if Fillette would be there, and Chantal, with an insider's smile, had said that Anne Ambleside kept very select company at her own events, and that Fillette – while a dear girl in other ways – was, as yet, not much more than a fluff bunny. Mia had not heard the term before, but she returned the insider's smile.

'I didn't realise you'd become pally with that crowd,' said Sebastian.

'I haven't,' said Mia. 'I have no idea why I've been invited.'

'Well well. And when are you off to frolic at the hooves of the horned god, then?'

'It's on the thirteenth, but I'm not necessarily going,' said Mia, deciding as she said it that she wouldn't. She had too much work to do.

'By the way,' said Sebastian. His profile looked iconic in the quarter-light. 'I want to ask you a favour.'

'Yes?'

'All that space down there,' he said, tapping the floor above Room Two with his loafer. 'It's done with, isn't it?'

'I think so. They've been working across the road for the last week.'

'So it's not being used for anything.'

'What have you got in mind?'

'Dane's just finished a script. How would it be if the get-along gang came and did some rehearsing here? In the early evenings, say? We won't be any bother. And it is such a nice space.'

'Dane writes, too?'

'Apparently.'

Mia had wondered once or twice when, if ever, Sebastian was going to start working again. 'I dunno,' she said, shrugging. 'Don't see why it should be a problem. Ask Victor.'

'No, I can't do that.'

'Why not? He's supportive of all the arts.'

'Ha.'

'What?'

'Victor Adamus doesn't know the first thing about the arts.'

'He owns a Rothko,' said Mia.

'Does he, now.'

'He was very keen on Dane's last play. He'll probably *build* you a place to rehearse, given half an ex...' She trailed off. The thought of Rothko had suddenly reminded her of something. Victor's eyes on



her from the other table at Fillette's party. He had asked her if she ever painted abstract art. Later, the first time she had set foot in the gallery, he had told her he had envisioned an abstract piece for the mural. *I tried to tell you once*, he had said. Perhaps the whole thing had not been Fillette's idea, after all, she thought. '...excuse,' she finished.

Sebastian didn't answer for a moment. 'Well, here's the thing,' he said at last, turning and coming closer. She opened her mouth to tell him stop, hold your pose, but then changed her mind. 'It's supposed to be a secret,' he went on. 'That's why we can't use the Whitechapel theatre.'

'A secret play? You're not going to have much commercial success.'

'We're going to spring it on the public fully formed.'

Mia was hard-pressed to see any harm in it. He was Fillette's brother, after all. 'Is it controversial?' she said.

'One can hope.'

It was in the mellowest hour of the longest day of the year that Sebastian arrived, as agreed, for the first rehearsal. Any day but Friday, she had told him. Victor still made an appearance from time to time on Friday afternoons.

'She's probably dancing naked,' said Mia.

'I will remember to call that image to mind next time I am inappropriately enthused,' said Sebastian.

The builders had knocked off, and he and Mia shared a cigarette on the great black steps outside the main entrance, watching the big yellow Caterpillar trundling back to its lair and speculating on how Anne Ambleside might be celebrating the solstice.

'I'm sure you'll be sorely missed,' said Sebastian.

'I'm sure I won't.'

Mia was wearing her Radiohead tank top and denim shorts. Sebastian had rolled up the sleeves of his V-neck jersey. The buried heat of the flagstones against Mia's thighs was just this side of painful and dangerously soporific. 'Are they generally late?' she said.

'Generally.'

That was fine by her. The fewer people left on the premises when they arrived, the better. In fact, she thought, in future she would get them to come at six or later. She rose and yawned. 'Well, I'd better get back to it,' she said. 'You can see them in.'

A half hour later the cast arrived: Jamie Lamington, Charles, Ginger, and a new girl – new to Mia, at least – called Vianne.

Mia went out onto the skywalk when she heard the buzzer ting, just to watch them safely into the building.

'Press the button,' she called down to Sebastian. In the foyer, he called yeh.

She hovered as they trooped in loudly, feeling partly the conscientious hostess, partly like the ancient knight in *India Jones and the Last Crusade* when the Nazis broached the inner sanctum of the grail fortress. Lonely and cautious. And pleased, when she saw the faces turn up to marvel, hushed, at the great spaces, the soaring darkness, the heavy light.

'Blimey,' said Jamie Lamington. 'Not bad.'

Dane looked up. She lifted a hand in greeting, and he smiled, and made her a deep cavalier's bow. 'We thank you for your hospitality,' he called. Some graces, for all his airs, she thought.

'No problem,' she called back, the hostess winning out by ten lengths. 'You can use any room; I'll be up here.'

'We won't be long, today.'

'Suits me.'

She peeked out again an hour or so later, to see Sebastian and Dane standing side by side in Room One with scripts in hand, warming up their voices and tossing their heads like a pair of overbred Norwegian Forest ponies. It was just a read-through, it seemed, no one was actually acting, and there were frequent out-of-characters interjections.

The next day she came back and began doing some blocking. There were arguments about which way the Whitechapel stage faced, and Mia, who had a good head for orientation, ventured to arbitrate.

There were two days when they didn't come, and then Sebastian called to ask if she would be working there that Sunday. She said she would.

They showed up in stages from ten in the morning. Dane arrived last, in black gym clothes and sneakers, continental sweat patches under his elbows and down his chest. The veins were standing out on his hands and forehead. 'I'm late,' he announced to the waiting flock. He cast off his outer layer dramatically, as if whatever was underneath might reveal the reason for this. It revealed a great amount of billowing flesh and further bulging veins.

'Holy smoke,' said Mia. 'He looks like he's about to pop.' Beside her on the skywalk, Sebastian laughed.

Then she wondered: 'Is *his* hair really blond?'

'Who knows,' said Sebastian. 'It was always blond at Guildhall.'

'Was he all buff like that at Guildhall?'

'Oh, yes. He has been thus inflated since the age of nineteen, on the perpetual off-chance that someone might take it upon themselves to cast him as Spartacus.'

She had allowed him to have a cigarette inside, something she had given herself permission to do from time to time, but from which she had hitherto forbidden him, on the argument that he smoked more and his cigarettes smelled worse.

'So,' said Sebastian. 'When is the gallery opening?'

'July.'

'What date?'

'The twentieth, as it stands.'

'Is that likely to change?'

'Depends on how they do across the way. When they're finished building they still have to do the modelling in the restaurant section, and then the landscaping. Why?'

He took hold of a cable in each hand, the cigarette between his teeth, and spoke around the filter: 'Just wondering if you're going to make it in time.'

'Make it? What, with the mural?'

'Mm.' He puffed smoke out the side of his mouth. He was at the spot where the railings came to the nadir of their 'V', leaning out over Room One with his back to her, like a figurehead on a ship. Mia folded her arms to stop herself from expressing anxiety. The skywalk swayed and she took hold of a cable herself.

'Why shouldn't I?'

'Never mind.' He let one hand free, and swung himself out over Room One, back round towards the skywalk, and took hold of an adjacent cable, so that he was facing her, his outstretched arms and the neck of his jersey and his eyebrows echoing the V made by the cables and the railings. To her satisfaction, Mia managed not to gasp or even twitch.

'Mr. Middleman,' called Dane from below. 'You're wanted.'

'That's your cue, Jackie Chan,' said Mia.

In addition to the original six, there were a pair of identical male twins today, whom Mia had not seen before and who she gathered were not a regular part of the company. They were called Evan and Aaron, and Dane lost his temper at them frequently and indiscriminately. The auditioning and casting of the twins had taken up a fair whack of time, Sebastian told Mia, and Dane was taking out his frustration on the successful candidates, who – it was no secret – he considered the best of a sorry bunch, and whose close resemblance to one another only barely compensated for their parlous inadequacy as individuals.

Forgetting that this was why he had hired them, Dane complained frequently that it was quite impossible to tell them apart. As he could never remember which one was wearing which set of clothes, and had a terrible memory for names anyway, he forced them to wear large nametags, to which degradation they submitted with quiet terror. The fact that the nametags said not 'Evan' and 'Aaron,' but 'Mary-Kate' and 'Ashley' was Mia's fault.

The gimmick of the play – and, Sebastian said, one reason why it had to be kept quiet – was that the lead role would be shared by the twins, and that the audience was not to realise that two actors had been involved until they took their bows. Increasingly rapid costume changes, and, at one point, an exit stage left followed immediately by an entry stage right, would make it progressively harder for

the audience to grasp how this character could be everywhere at once, “throwing the audience into a state of hermeneutical discomfiture proportionate to the character’s existential discomfiture,” as Dane put it, until, eventually, the two men ‘met’ on stage, and the “tension of the suspected breach of the implicit receiver/narrative contract, as well as the laws of physics, was resolved.”

‘Like Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen in *Full House*,’ said Mia, who thought it all sounded a bit contrived.

‘Bitsy, fetch us a pen,’ said Dane.

Badly behind schedule herself, (although she had not admitted this to Sebastian,) Mia did not have the requisite head-space to take an interest in the proceedings below, and she thus maintained only the most tenuous notion of what the plot involved. As far as she had gathered from the snatches of dialogue that reached her ears and the odd glance at the action when she took a smoke break on the skywalk, the play was set in some sort of generic modern office building, in the middle of which there was a kind of wormhole, through which the twins’ character passed, thus obliging him to live a series of parallel lives in various periods of history.

‘You! Mary-Kate!’ she heard Dane bellowing from Room One. ‘You are supposed to be a *slave*. Stop standing up straight.’

‘I’m not -.’

‘Now, Boy, as I was saying, you are at this point to imagine that you are very intelligent. Also, try and make up your mind once and for all which leg has the limp in it, or I will be forced to provide you with a way to remember.’

‘I’m just wondering, Dane, what’s David Littleman *thinking* about when he’s saying this line about the persecution of the Russian peasant family?’ That was Jamie Lamington’s voice. It sounded surprisingly like Dane’s in rhythm and tone – she had not noticed until now that he was out of eyeshot.

‘He’s thinking about the persecution of the Russian peasant family, evidently. Hunch, Mary-Kate, hunch, damn you!’

‘I’m Evan.’

‘Haven’t we been over this?’

‘What I’m saying is, I am Ashley,’ said Evan, with some dignity.

‘Oh. What are you doing on stage, then?’

‘We said the stage began at the third tile from the wall. I’m on the second tile from the wall.’

Mia, amused enough to be distracted, went through to the skywalk, and her eye fell on Dane. He was wearing a toga – he alone of all of them was in costume – and making a bellicose gesture at Sebastian, who knelt before him with his head bowed. The roof creaked and clacked as the heat of the day left the earth and the gallery settled its weight, and Dane looked up at the sound, and for a moment their eyes met in the black room where the last of the Sunday light filtered through the windows, bearing summer into the long high spaces. Finally she realised who he had reminded her of ever since she had first seen him out of drag: Sam’s cousin, Felix.

He had delivered an address in a toga once, Felix, at one or another Historical Society event, and that was the way she had always remembered him, wreathed in ivy and reciting Virgil from memory.

They looked nothing alike: Dane was large and Aryan, Felix was stocky and ginger, but it was in that Gaze, equal parts Dionysus and Apollo; the union of physical, sexual, artistic and intellectual potency, the mastery of all the forces of creation, and the matter-of-fact awareness thereof, that the resemblance lay.

Fe-he-he-lix *Baummm*, Mia mouthed, the way Sam used to greet him. He had won the Rhodes, of course. Was he still here, in England? Had Matt ever come across him at Oxford? It wasn't impossible; Felix was bound to have made his presence felt. He would no doubt end up in politics, eventually, if he ever came back.

*The Orator*, she thought, looking at Dane, thinking of Felix, and drawing Tarot cards in her head.

He had made that remarkable eulogy at Sam's funeral. She remembered that at one point he had stopped, mid-sentence, and stared right at her, before continuing on as if nothing had happened.

DON'T FINISH IT.

Why not? She thought back. She had never addressed this second voice of hers before.

Something will happen.

What?

Something.

I have to finish it.

Felix – no, it was Dane, his name was Dane Chevenix-Trench, had looked away again, and was continuing his soliloquy.

The sound of injustice has no echo in the houses of the voiceless, said Dane to Mary-Kate.

Oh *puhlease*, said Mia to herself, and returned to her toils.

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Later that week, Mia stopped in at Fillette Maddox Studio of the Healing Arts to pick up her cheque, and to tell Chantal she would not be attending July's garden party, either.

As she had missed June's, Chantal had invited Mia to the next.

'Let me guess,' said Mia. 'On the twelfth.'

'That's right.'

Mia weighed it up. Helena had blackmailed her into promising that she would not involve herself with 'that crowd' with threats of reporting to their mother. But having wiggled her way into Chantal's

good graces, she did not wish to appear ungrateful. And she was still curious to find out what Mrs. Ambleside's interest in her was.

In the end, the decision had been made for her: visiting that Friday afternoon, Victor announced that the twelfth was now to be the night of the gallery opening.

'I thought it was going to be more towards the end of the month,' said Mia, thinking with dismay how much she still had to do.

'Nadia Petrovsky is leaving for America on the thirteenth,' said Victor.

'Ah,' said Mia. 'That's that, then.'

Victor and his board had decided that the opening event would double as a benefit for the Adamus Foundation, and a work by the most prominent featured artist, Nadia Petrovsky, was going to be auctioned. If Nadia Petrovsky asked for the twelfth, the twelfth she would have.

'Is Chantal in?' Mia said to Melanie, whom she found cleaning one of the white rooms with an unusually martial intensity.

Melanie looked up with her brown eyes flashing. 'Oh,' she said. 'It's you, is it. Well hello, there.'

Mia frowned. 'What's wrong?'

'Don't act like you don't know,' said Melanie.

'I don't,' said Mia.

'Well, I got sacked, didn't I? I've got two weeks to get my arse out of here.'

'What? Why?'

'You're the only person I told, Mia.'

'Told what?'

'About dating one of our clients.'

'I didn't tell Fillette, I swear!' said Mia. This much was true. 'It must have been Chantal.'

'I never told Chantal.'

'No,' said Mia. 'I did.'

'Why did you tell Chantal?'

'We were just chatting one day. I had no idea she would...'

'Well,' said Melanie. 'Maybe Chantal and Fillette were also just chatting one day.' She was shoving products into the cupboard, the bottom of each bottle and tub hitting the shelf with a *cluck*. 'That's what I've always hated about this place. There's a great deal of *chatting* goes on here.'

'Mel,' said Mia. 'I'm sorry. I really didn't do it vindictively.' She hadn't intended any bad consequences for Melanie. She had just become tired of being the Studio whipping-boy. She hadn't wanted to get Melanie in trouble at all, just spread the scrutiny around a bit.

Melanie looked Mia in the face and smiled a smile that gave Mia chills. 'For your sake I hope you believe that,' she said.

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'Isn't it obvious to anyone else how she sabotages people when they get in the way of what she wants?' said Cassie.

'Sabotages people?' Justin frowned. 'It's really not Susannah's fault that Rex signed the thing.'

The early Saturday shift at Quigley's always involved a good deal of elbow-grease: no one ever had the energy to clean up after the Friday crowds the same night. Cassie and Justin were in the kitchen, unloading the dishwasher and watching the chef grill bangers. You have to baby them, said the chef. Justin grimaced: he had been challenged to down-downs by a Glaswegian the night before, and the sausage smell was an unwelcome reminder of the fact that he had a stomach.

Justin and Rex had, tentatively, discussed getting a set together in time for the Jazz and Blues Festival in August. If it went well enough, Rex had said, in so many words, he might finally pack it in with Vicious Spiral. Rex had mentioned the first half of this to Susannah, only to be informed that, like Susannah herself, not only was he bound to the band until they had produced and toured with a second album, but that he would be in breach of contract if he so much as performed with anyone else and received payment for it.

'I was living on Cheerios,' had been his defence when he broke the news to Justin.

'I bet you never even read the thing,' Justin had answered, livid.

'I did read it, you bastard. I had arse to negotiate with. I would have signed if they told me I had to roll around in broken glass before each gig.'

Cassie came back through from the bar for another load of clean glasses. 'I'm not talking about the contract,' she said, although they had undeniably been talking about the contract up to that point.

'What are you talking about?

'I'm talking about the way she manipulates Rex. Even you. And the way she monopolises Lucas.'

Cassie was talking, specifically, about the fact that Justin and Susannah were going up to Kilgry together that afternoon, together. Cassie found it outrageous that he continued fraternising across enemy lines. Justin told her not to be so melodramatic, for a start, and secondly, that their friendships were not so fragile that they couldn't shelve disagreements for the space of a balmy Saturday afternoon and just hang out together. Cassie had said that if she had friends like Susannah she wouldn't need enemies.

'Sabotage' is a very strong word, Cassie.'

'Shit-stirring, if you prefer.'

'What do you call what you're doing now?' said Justin.

Cassie raised an eyebrow at him. Justin shrugged. 'If the shoe fits on the other foot...'



'I'm am merely trying to protect your interests.'

Justin, Rex and Lucas had made no secret of the existence of the band they had dubbed Same River Twice. There was nothing Susannah or her label could say about Rex simply mucking about with some friends, but, at least in Cassie's eyes, she was still doing everything she could to interfere. Every time Lucas was in Edinburgh, Susannah was there. Lately she had even been pitching up at Kilgrye when they were recording.

'Her brother lives there, Cassie,' Justin had said.

'He doesn't live in the assembly room.'

'I feel compelled to point out that you also come to our recording sessions.'

'That's different,' said Cassie. 'I just like spending time with you guys.'

'Maybe she just likes spending time with us, too,' said Justin.

'Ha! I'm not watching my band mutiny before my eyes.'

Cassie was referring to the two sessions for which Bruce had been roped in to record a few drum tracks. Justin had to admit that it was slightly suspect that it was these same two sessions that Susannah had attended. But, he pointed out, she had behaved well. She had even offered to sing backing vocals on one of the songs.

'But don't you see?' said Cassie. 'It's part of her strategy. She did that to remind you that it's all play-play. She's throwing it in your faces. You can't use her vocals any more than you can use Bruce's drum tracks, or Rex's lead guitar tracks.'

Justin shook his head at her incredulously, smiling. 'What it is to be female,' he said. 'I would never have figured that out for myself.' He turned and began digging around in the fridge. 'It's funny in a way that you dislike her so much,' he said.

'I don't dislike her,' said Cassie.

'Oh.'

'Why is it funny?'

'Because the two of you are very similar,' he said. 'In some ways.'

'In which ways?' said Cassie.

'Ah,' said Justin carefully. 'You both like to have things in hand, if you know what I mean.'

'I don't know what you mean, no.'

'You both like to be the Indian Chief.'

'The Indian Chief?'

'Never mind,' said Justin, backing down before her dangerously becalmed regard.

'So can I come with you?' said Cassie. 'This afternoon.'

'I suppose so,' said Justin. 'Won't your dad want to see you today?'

'I'll go this evening.'

Justin closed the fridge. He turned to face her, revealing a saucer holding a cupcake with a small candle in it. 'There we go,' he said.

'Oh,' said Cassie, meekly. 'Is that for me?'

He took a lighter to the wick. 'Make a wish.'

Cassie smiled and blew out the candle. 'I wish I never brought it up.'

Justin clucked his tongue. 'Now see, silly wench, you've wasted your wish.'

'How so?'

'Every way imaginable. Firstly, you're not supposed to say what it is, or it won't come true. Moreover, you can't wish you had never done something.'

'Why not?'

'Because,' said Justin 'because that's not a wish at all. It's a regret.'

Cassie realised every wish she had made in the last year was null and void.

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With the arrival of spring, the whole of Kilgrey had been doused in a wash of meretricious puppet-monarch purple as the rhododendrons came up on every square inch of fallow soil. They were aliens, Lucas said, and toxic. One year the two incumbent bulls had taken it into their heads to tear down the fence between the pasture and the moor, and the whole herd had become sick.

To Cassie the colour seemed gauche in this staid landscape; uncalled for.

The weather was kind and hazy now as Justin and Cassie stood side by side against the fence of the round pen, watching Lucas, with one foot each propped up on the lowest plank, their upper arms companionably in contact, and occasionally blowing their noses on the lengths of bogroll Justin habitually carted around with him in the hayfever season.

'Socrates says we can see the soul as a charioteer, a noble steed, and an ignoble steed,' said Cassie. 'The noble steed works with the charioteer, trying to rein in the ignoble steed, and guide the chariot towards truth and goodness.' Justin's skin was sun-warmed, and Cassie fancied he was solar-powered, like Superman, or DH Lawrence, and that by having her own cooler arm in contact with his she was tapping into this power, that potential energy.

It was easier to think of Plato. Her most vivid association with horses was forged on Coetzenberg a year, no, a year and a half, earlier.

'Uh huh,' said Justin, whose most vivid association with horses did not tend towards the transcendental.

It was a memory from the days of his father's brief flirtation with the culture of expensive things that go very fast on four legs. He had been taken to see his father's new three-year-old (Guillherme Silveira took care to refer to it as a three-year-old, not a horse) at a racehorse yard outside Jo'burg. He remembered his father making broad gestures, pretending his baseball cap was a Stetson, and standing with one foot up on the paddock fence.

Together they had watched as the groom put the animal, sleek like a Concorde, through its paces. 'This one's going to make me proud,' his father had said, and Justin, thirteen, had convinced himself he had imagined the emphasis, or that if the emphasis was there, it was referring to another horse. He had wandered off in a strange temper, longing for London in a way that was represented by an inchoate conflation of his mother, the cricket tour he was missing to be here, and a girl named Bianca Black on whom he had half-decided he had a crush. He watched morosely as his new Reeboks quickly became covered in mud, sure his father had deliberately not warned him to change them. Seeking shelter from the wind, he had walked into the establishment's breeding barn, and so witnessed, inadvertently and unforgettably, what was involved in the 'harvesting' of sperm from a stud horse. The stallion with its forelegs up on the dummy mare, every part of it inflamed and straining, while a female lab technician in a white coat efficiently and indifferently went about the work of getting the merchandise out of him in the conventional, low-tech way. Justin had, at that age, not yet been as close to a woman as the stallion was, and had felt very hot and a bit sick. Stupid horse, it can't even tell the difference, he had thought.

'Now the interesting thing,' said Cassie, 'is Freud said exactly the same thing about the functioning of the psyche, with the super-ego, the ego and the id.'

'Mm hmm,' Justin nodded. He took his foot down from the fence and sneezed.

In the round pen were Hattie, Danny, Lucas and Toby Carmichael, and Gandalf the horse. Ruby was tethered just outside it, next to the mounting block on top of which Toby Carmichael stood, breaking bites out of an apple with his teeth which he alternately swallowed and removed from his mouth to feed to the mare.

She was a high strung horse and made Cassie nervous, but Susannah wasn't scared of her.

'Good horse, auld girl,' said Susannah, stroking Ruby's rump. 'You're not an ignoble steed, are you?'

'Isn't it supposed to be dangerous to stand behind a horse?' said Cassie.

'She knows me.' She began to speak to the horse in a strange language which made Justin smile and left Cassie none the wiser. Eventually she recognised a word, and realised it was Elvish.

Scoffing internally, Cassie leaned her head on her forearms and let her eyes rest on Toby Carmichael, purely because that was where her head ended up. He was standing on the mounting block, swaying slightly, as if with the breeze, like a New York skyscraper built to have play, and gazing into the forest with a frown.

Cassie forgot where she had been going with the *Phaedrus*, contentedly entranced by his strappingness and the beams of sun tossed between the boughs of the sycamores behind.

The Carmichaels were lovely with each other, the three boys together, Toby, nineteen, Chris, twenty-five, and Lucas Carmichael, not quite twenty-eight. Watching them, Cassie, ever fascinated by the dynamics of siblingship, had found that her previous idea of what went for brothers (garnered mostly from Ben and Sam) did not cover adults, or farm boys, or Scots. It was in the way they talked. Their conversation was about the landscape and contained and worked it like any of the other tools they had to hand. A bucket, a rope, a spade, a word. All had a use and produced an effect.

It made her feel foppish, standing there with Justin talking about Plato with their noses streaming while the Carmichaels, mucking out the stables, were up to their elbows in manure.

Round and round went Gandalf with Hattie on his back and Lucas leading them. The burn could be heard, sounding nearer than usual. In truth it was fuller: they had had a week of rain the month before.

Lucas seemed far older than his age to Cassie, at least in comparison with herself and Justin. Wherever he was he *presided*, benignly, unobtrusively, the absentee landlord sticking his head in, and seeming forever to be biding his time, to be about to go elsewhere, to more important things, for all the world like Gandalf Greyhame at Bilbo Baggins's birthday party.

One could not have called him condescending; he was nothing if not down-to-earth. Quite possibly, she considered, it was only because his eyes never engaged anything or anyone. He was bound to *seem* absent.

'What are you so deep in conversation about?' Lucas called to them.

'I was saying that it makes me think of Plato's *Phaedrus*, the three of you,' said Cassie.

'The three of us?'

'You, and Gandalf and Ruby.'

'What does Plato have to say about the three of us?'

'Well, in the Chariot Allegory, he describes how the soul can be seen to be composed of a charioteer, and an ignoble horse, and a noble horse,' said Cassie. 'The first steed is white and long-necked, and does not need a whip. The second steed is black, and short-necked –'

'She's not black,' said Susannah. 'And Gandalf isn't white.'

'He is white.'

'He's not. He's grey.'

'Looks pretty white to me,' said Cassie.

'Only horses with pink skin are called white,' said Lucas. 'Gandalf has black skin. He's a grey.'

'That's not really the important part,' said Justin. 'Besides which... *harangue! Harangue!*'

'Bless you,' said Cassie.

They were both violently allergic to the rhododendrons.

Justin managed to make hayfever seem like something enjoyable, letting forth virile, life-affirming sneezes after a volley of which he would snort and shake his head and pop his ears and often as not say *Hoo-ah*.

It left Cassie drained of all but snot. Her eyes were cushiony, and her skull was surrounded by a penumbra of dejection and irritability. She enjoyed it though for the fact that they shared it, that they sneezed together and sniffed together and both avoided breathing at all over the same stretches of hillside. It was like evidence of blood kinship, unfortunate genes passed down, where there was none.

'Justin -' she began, wanting to ask him for another piece of bog-roll.

'Hmm?' he said, but her attention had shifted, because at the same time she heard Hattie say, get up with me, Sam.

Cassie jerked internally. She was still not used to that. 'Get up with me,' said Hattie again.

'Then who will lead him, Merry?' said Lucas. He was only teasing her, delaying while he thought about it. Cassie realised that this was why he did it and was pleased by the fact that she realised.

'He will lead himself,' said Hattie.

Lucas paused for a further second. 'He's not so young as he used to be. We'll be too heavy for him together.' Gandalf looked to Cassie as if he could quite comfortably have borne all three Carmichaels.

'He can bear us for a little while, see if he can't,' said Hattie.

Another pause. Against her arm, Justin shifted and blew, horse-like himself.

'Areet, just for a minute,' said Lucas, and flipped the reins over Gandalf's head. The horse stood like a stone as he threw himself up behind Hattie, not bothering with the mounting block, which was still occupied by Toby. He, Toby, had frozen in mid-chew, she saw, and was standing now fully upright, Doric, the knuckles of his toes white in his ruddy-brown feet, his eyes narrowed against the light and his head tilted in checked judgement in a way that reminded Cassie with a distant twinge of the photo of Ben Loudon in the Sunday Times. Ruby fumbled at his hand. He fed her the core of the apple without looking and wiped his hand on his front.

'Make him run, Samwise,' said Hattie.

'You know you'll get scared,' said Lucas.

'I won't, make him run.'

Lucas sighed briefly and urged Gandalf to a trot. The horse lowered his ears resignedly. Round and round they went, Hattie jouncing, making trembly noises in her nose, her hands gripping the pommel, her shoulders hunched, until Lucas said, 'Danny's turn.'

'Nooo!'

'It's Pippin's turn now, Master Meriadoc,' he coaxed.

'No.' Less fury, more guile. 'Danny doesn't want a turn.'

Danny indeed seemed little concerned about whether he would miss his turn or not.

'Do you want a ride, Danny?' called Susannah. He didn't answer. He was halving and quartering a piece of straw.

'Oh well. No point forcing him,' said Lucas.

'I'd like a turn,' said Cassie, utterly surprising herself.

Lucas turned his head towards her. 'You would, lass?'

'Thought you didn't like horses,' said Susannah. Her voice was unexpectedly near and full-bodied after the space-flattened exchanges her ear had been tuned to from inside the round pen.

'I like that horse,' she said, climbing over the fence nimbly enough and approaching. 'Is it all right, Lucas?'

'Acourse.' He helped Hattie down. She whined once, very high and soft, and then flounced over to Danny and sat down.

Lucas made a cup with his hands. Cassie, slow to process logistics, tried to put her ankle in it. 'No, lass, your foot, your other foot,' said Lucas. 'Step on me.'

'Ah.'

'And a-one, a-two, a-three,' he hoisted her up and she threw her leg over Gandalf's back. Success. 'Shall I leave you the reins?'

'I don't know, what do you think?'

'He's working well, you should be okay.'

'Lead me rather, I'm bound to do something wrong.'

She had no horsecraft. What on Earth am I doing, she thought, perched, she assumed idiotically, atop the great iceberg of horseflesh and being paraded around in a singularly uninspiring circle for reasons that had swiftly escaped her.

And Gandalf the Grey, a peaceable goldfish, chose that moment to produce an enormous turd, which tumbled noisily from his moving backside and thumped to the dust, where it lay glaucous and splendidly self-identical, drawing a short 'hneh' of laughter from Danny.

The horse eyed his creation with satisfaction as they made their next and final turn.

Lucas is going to step in it, Cassie thought, but she said nothing as the inevitable impended, worried as always that to do so would be to insult him, in case he *had* seen it, like explaining what a word means to someone who already knows. They drew closer.

She looked towards Justin for help in the matter, but he was beside Toby, balanced with one foot on the mounting block and the other on the top rung of the fence. Both were looking into the forest now, locked in some inaudible exchange. They were not aware.

'Ah, Lucas,' said Cassie, too late, as his foot sank deep into the musty embrace of the dropping.

Hattie gave a shrill and raucous cry of glee. Hell hath no fury.

At least one of us here is honest, Cassie thought.

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When Lucas Carmichael had first noticed that he couldn't see the notes on his sheet music properly, his parents had taken him to an optometrist. The optometrist gave him thick glasses and a set of eye exercises to do twice a day.

A month later he couldn't see the notes at all, and his parents took him to a doctor.

The doctor sent Lucas to another doctor, who did a number of tests, diagnosed Lucas with macular degeneration, and told him he could expect to be functionally blind by the age of fifteen.

He also told Lucas that his brothers could consider themselves extremely lucky that the gene had not been expressed in all three of them. But Lucas, age nine, had already stopped believing in luck.

The last piece of music he ever learned the normal way was Consolation No.2 in E by Liszt. It was this piece that Lucas was attempting to play the day he finally lost heart. Halfway through his piano lesson, he dropped his hands in his lap. 'It's too difficult,' he said.

His teacher had quietly lifted the music book from the piano, paged through it, humming, then closed it with a weary 'humph.'

'You know,' said Mr. Schaech. 'I'm tired of all these stuffy Europeans. How about you?'

Lucas, who could no longer see the music written by the stuffy Europeans through the milky haze that coated his central vision, said, with affected listlessness, that he thought he might be tired of piano in general. Lucas had not yet mentioned his failing vision to Mr. Schaech. But his mother had.

'Let me play you something from across the pond,' said Mr. Schaech. 'Just for a change. If you like it, we'll work on that instead.'

He played *Tea for Two* by Art Tatum.

'I could never learn all that,' Lucas had said. He couldn't even imagine what it might look like on a page.

'Well, the wonderful thing about the Americans is that they realised you don't have to,' said Mr. Schaech. 'You can make it up as you go along.'

'I don't get it,' said Lucas. But he wanted to get it. Already the veneer of indifference was peeling.

'Because he lost his vision, right?' said Cassie. 'That's why your teacher chose Art Tatum.'

Lucas smiled so broadly that her heart hurt.

She smiled back, and then laughed instead. This was already becoming a habit. One cannot hear a smile.

They were alone together now, strolling at a steady pace along the footpath by the pasture, as if they had somewhere to get to.

Cassie wasn't sure exactly why it had happened this way, but it had.



She had left the company when the two younger Carmichaels and Justin had gone round to Chris's offices to play *Counterstrike*. Cassie, bored within minutes of watching them cluster-bomb each others' ground troops, had gone round to the farmhouse to see why Lucas was taking so long to change his soiled shoes. She discovered him in the midst of another serious conversation with Susannah that halted as soon as she entered the room, and she had excused herself hurriedly. Feeling left out and spare, she had started walking, a third time, up to the bench at the top of the footpath, telling herself that this was the last, the very last time, that she would invite herself along to something Justin was doing.

She had been sitting on the bench for perhaps half an hour when she saw Lucas walking alone on the road below her. She had stood up and called his name, and he had changed course and climbed the path to meet her.

'I was wondering where you'd wandered off to,' he had said, a little out of breath.

'I'm just watching the trees swimming,' said Cassie.

'Swimming, lass?' said Lucas.

Cassie began to point, then realised that was pointless, and dropped her hand. 'It's something I noticed the first, or no, the second time I was here,' she said. 'There's some sort of an optical illusion by those trees on that side of the forest. They look like they're being sucked down a drain.'

'Really?' said Lucas. 'That's remarkable.'

He had smiled as he said it, and at first Cassie thought he was making fun of her. But then he told her that he remembered this phenomenon vividly from his childhood, and, never having seen it again after the age of eleven, he had eventually concluded that it must have been either his imagination, or some sort of early symptom of the eye disease.

It was the first time Cassie had heard him make mention of his condition.

'How much of the farm have you seen?' he had asked her.

'Just this part,' said Cassie. 'And the cat stone, of course,' she added ruefully.

'Let's walk a bit. It's nice at this time of year.'

They had started walking down the other side of the hill, towards the forest, but they took the branch that went around it and back to the pastures rather than entering it. Lucas had asked her to tell him the rest of Plato's Chariot Allegory. Flattered, she had complied, and found each idea summoning up another, until she had wandered deep into the concatenating spirals of her own concerns. She had no knack for *précis*. She could not speak of *Phaedrus* without telling him how Plato had found his way into her work, and proceeded to commandeer it wholesale. But he was a willing audience, and seemed to have an appetite for new concepts, and she talked on and on.

'The dialogue between Socrates and Phaedrus involves the word *pharmakon*, which can mean both poison *and* medicine, *pharmakeia*, which means sorcery or poisoning, and *pharmakeus*, which

means wizard, or magician,' she said. 'Then there's another word, *pharmakos*, which isn't mentioned outright by Plato. But Derrida says it's there, tacitly. It's implied. There's a shadow, or an echo, of it, in that meme-chain. Like... oh, it's hard to explain.'

'No, I do understand,' said Lucas. 'Like harmonics on a natural scale.'

'Like what?'

'Like harmonics resonating on a natural scale.'

'Eh?' said Cassie, experiencing an old excitement, which had she stopped to think about it, she would have identified as air in the bellows to the fire that burns in the mind of the student of the arts when they are in the presence, or imminent presence, of a good metaphor.

'Without getting too technical,' said Lucas, 'if I play a note, an E, say, there are a whole lot of other notes on the E major scale, above, or within that E, or to use your word, implied by it, that aren't detectable to the ear, but which sound at whole number multiples above the frequency of that E, and resonate there, even though you are only striking, and hearing, one note.'

'That's exactly – resonate, yes exactly.'

'So, one could say then, by way of analogy, that *Pharmakos* is on the same natural scale as the other words.'

'Lucas, quit the music business. Become a philosopher.'

He laughed. 'That might've suited me better,' he said, half to himself.

'Better than music?'

'That too, since you mention it,' said Lucas. 'But what I actually meant is that philosophy might have suited me better than theology. That's what I did, first.'

'Really!'

'Two years, at Edinburgh.'

'Were you going to... go into it? As a career?'

'At that time, yes,' said Lucas.

'Did you have a calling?' said Cassie, intrigued.

He smiled. 'I did, actually. But not to the church. I always wanted to be a doctor. Then I started losing my vision. So there went that idea. I thought I could help people this way instead.'

*Help people this way instead.* As if it were a given that there could be no other course for his life. It probably came of growing up at Kilgry, at least in part, Cassie thought. All people did here was help other people.

'Tell me then,' she said. 'Why is it that Justin says it's because of you that he believes in God?'

'He said that?' said Lucas. 'My word.'

'You don't remember converting him?'

'I certainly didn't try,' said Lucas. 'We had a lot of long conversations at university. I suppose some of it must have stuck.' He chuckled. 'It's annoying, really. Like teaching someone how to play your sport, and then they instantly turn out to be better at it than you ever were.'

'How so?'

'I never got the hang of faith,' said Lucas. 'But Justin has a talent for it. I think I was trying to convince myself, more than him. Argue myself into it. But the more I read, the harder it became to make sense of it. I suppose I thought about it too hard.'

'The more you... read?' said Cassie.

'Listened,' said Lucas. 'To books.'

She hoped she hadn't embarrassed him. She had long ago noticed that he referred to watching things, and looking at things, the way anyone would, and had yet to establish how much of it was turn of phrase. 'Anyhow,' he went on. 'I packed it in eventually.'

'And you ended up a pianist,' said Cassie.

'Well, I like to think I ended up a teacher,' said Lucas.

It was at this point that Lucas had told her about the man he had gone to visit in Durham.

'I wanted to give up everything,' said Lucas. 'Piano. Cricket. School. It all seemed pointless. But he pulled me out of it.'

'You say his name is Mr. Shaech?' said Cassie.

'Aye.'

'Is he...'

'He's her father.'

'He's her father?' said Cassie.

'Aye.'

Somewhere in the course of this conversational palindrome, Cassie put two and two together and made five. 'Is he still unwell?' she said.

'He's dying,' said Lucas. 'Cirrhosis.'

'I'm sorry,' said Cassie.

They walked on between the purple fields, silent for a while.

Lucas's guide-pack today included two of his father's working dogs: slight and wiry border collies both. They were more remote-controlled machines than animals under George Carmichael's command, and had something of his character; they were workaholic, and straightforward, and didn't suffer fools gladly. Staying ahead of the humans, they nosed, businesslike, through the rhododendrons. Cassie's own nose itched just to watch them at it. She blew it on the last piece of lavatory paper that Justin had bequeathed to her. She wished she had remembered to ask him for another.

'So what does it mean?' said Lucas

'What does what mean?'

'The other word. *Pharmakos*.'

'Oh. Well, it has two meanings. It's a synonym for *pharmakeus*; 'wizard'. But with the emphasis placed differently, it means "scapegoat."

'Ah,' said Lucas. 'I have you now.'

'You do?'

'Your mysterious pair of goats. The Day of Atonement. One sacrificed in the city, the other – the scapegoat – driven into the wilderness. Right?'

And now it was Cassie's turn to smile broadly. 'They had a similar ritual in Ancient Athens,' she said. 'In fact, there are versions all over the world.'

In "Plato's Pharmacy", she explained, Derrida used the word to refer to Socrates; both wizard – wise man, soothsayer – and scapegoat: falsely accused of heresy and corrupting the youth, and made to drink hemlock by the Sophists.

'He denounced writing,' said Cassie. 'He, Plato, or Socrates, depending on how you look at it, said that writing 'repeats without knowing.' In the absence of the father, the originator of the message, the truth is lost.'

The problem, not with South Africa, but with Cassie's thesis, was that she had internalised the message of the *Phaedrus*: she had come to be wary of the *pharmakon* – the poison – that Plato had identified in writing.

'I'm inclined to agree, although Derrida didn't,' said Cassie. 'I don't think it helps.'

'What would Plato have us do instead?' said Lucas.

She sneezed again. 'Talk.'

Her piece of bogroll was bedraggled now beyond usefulness as well as decency. Exploring the pockets of her denim jacket for an alternative, Cassie discovered Mia's bandanna. After a moment's hesitation, she blew her nose on that instead.

'Let's take another road, shall we?' Lucas suggested. 'These flowers don't seem to agree with you.'

They had already walked almost to the other end of the farm. 'Maybe we ought to be getting back to the farmhouse,' said Cassie. 'Justin wants to leave at five. He's got the evening shift.'

Lucas took his phone from his pocket and pressed a button. 'Four forty,' it said in a reasonable tone.

'Uh oh,' said Cassie.

'You can still get back in time if you run for it,' said Lucas.

'I think I'd better tell him to go without me. There's another shuttle today, isn't there?'

'The last one goes at six.'

'Six, okay. Is there any place nearby that has mobile reception?'

'We might have some luck if we go up to the sheep's grazing.'

'I suppose there's not much chance that he'll also have reception where he is.'

'There's Chris's landline.'

They tramped back round the pasture, and up the other side of the hill to the top of the valley.

Cassie had just managed to summon Justin's number when she saw a flash of synthetic colour moving in and out between the green and the purple below. It was Justin, down on the road, and probably looking for her.

She called and waved. Justin waved back and tapped at the place where his watch would have been if he owned one, and pointed towards the motorway.

She walked back down the path a short distance, until she was in earshot of him.

'We're leaving soon,' he called, a little irritably.

'You two go on,' she shouted back. 'I'll take the shuttle.'

'Uh,' said Justin, bemused, but as ever, unquestioning. 'Okay.' He turned back towards the road.

Cassie joined Lucas again, hoping he wouldn't ask her why she had just done what she had done. But all he said was, 'Is Susie leaving with him?'

'I think so,' said Cassie. 'He said 'we'.'

Lucas made a sound that was half sigh, half groan.

'Something wrong?'

'No. Well. I was hoping that this time she might come to Durham with me.'

'You're going back?'

'Tomorrow morning.'

Without conferring, they set off back towards the pasture road, to take the long way home. 'Does Danny see his father?' said Cassie, tentatively.

'No, Danny doesn't see him either,' said Lucas. 'It's a long story.'

'I don't mean to pry.'

'I know,' said Lucas. 'It's all right.'

They were at the top of the Kilgrey Road, on the edge of the forest, when a gunshot cracked through the air. All three dogs and both humans started.

'What was that?' said Cassie.

'It might be Tom,' said Lucas. 'Or it might not.'

He began walking swiftly towards the forest. The foremost collie, which had immediately set to barking in a no-nonsense way, now tore up the hill ahead of them. Lucas summoned it back sharply.

When they came to the top of the first hill, Cassie saw two figures at its foot on the other side, crouched over something huge with wings.

'Do they have guns?' he asked Cassie. He had not needed to ask if there were people.

'They have a rifle,' said Cassie.

'Toby was right.'

'Toby?'

'He said he thought he saw people in the forest, earlier.'

Lucas began striding down the hill towards the forest. "Oi!" he shouted. '*Feck off, ye sleekin baaaahsturts!*' It was the first time she had heard him talk with anything approaching anger. It broadened his accent, which had spent the last two years in the company of London chamber musicians. Cassie was a little concerned that he was hurling abuse at people who had rifles, but fortunately the two men turned tail and disappeared into the woods, leaving behind them the mass of gleaming and dishevelled feathers over which they had been poring.

'They come in after the pheasants,' said Lucas. 'But I don't think that's a pheasant.'

'I don't think so either.'

Together they descended to stand before what turned out to be an enormous owl.

More cat than bird to Cassie's eyes, it had long ear-tufts, a huge, flat face, and eyes the colour and shape of the planet Jupiter. As they approached it ruffled its chocolate-striped feathers, making itself seem even bigger, and cloaked its right wing. The left one lay limp.

The owl barked. The collies barked. Cole said nothing.

'Looks like we found your bullfrog, Cassie,' said Lucas. He made a gesture, and the sheepdogs turned and left for home.

'What is it?' said Cassie.

Lucas appeared to be staring at a tree some metres to his left, but he said, 'It's an eagle owl.'

'What are we going to do with it?'

'Tell me,' said Lucas. 'How badly is it hurt, do you think?'

'Its wing is trailing on the ground,' said Cassie. 'I don't see any blood, though.'

'Well it's certainly lively enough. Do us a favour, will you? Run down to Tom's house and ask him for one of the small cages.'

'What are you going to do?'

'Nothing. I'm just going to keep it here as much as possible and follow it if it moves.'

Cassie turned to run, then stopped. 'What if Tom isn't in?'

'Look about in the tool-shed.'

'For Tom, or for a cage?'

'Both. Either.'

She set off at a sprint.

'Cassie!'

'Yes?'

'And some gloves *if* they're handy. But be quick.'

Cassie was a good natural runner; she had long legs and an effective, if inelegant, ungulate's lope. She made it to Tom's house in only a few minutes and slowed to a halt, pleased by how quickly her breathing returned to normal.

Tom was not, after all, at home, and she covered the distance down the farm road to the toolshed at the same sprinter's pace for the pleasure of it. She found the shed door tied up with a bit of thick wire which she took some time to undo.

Jogging back, she heard, at some distance, an angry barking and a loud yelp. Lucas was calling Cole. She ran faster.

'I think Cole is hurt,' said Lucas when she arrived, puffing, at the scene. 'Is Cole hurt?'

There was a wound on the dog's leg; a badge of red ruining the perfect white of his fur. His ears were cupped low and he was whining. Both Cole and Lucas looked more upset than she'd ever seen them.

'He has some lacerations on his right foreleg,' said Cassie in her father's voice.

'It just happened right now.'

'I heard.'

'He was curious. He got too close to the owl. He has a trusting nature. How bad is it?'

'It's not spewing, I don't think the owl got anything major, but there's... ah... it's like a flap of skin hanging.' The owl was trembling, its planet-like orange eyes stretched beyond all reason or good taste, its head making little rhythmic sidling movements. She looked at the black talons on its shaggy feet, and thought Cole got off very lightly.

Cassie fished the bandanna out again. She knelt, and tied it carefully around the dog's leg, snotty side out, in such a way that the flap of skin was settled in its correct position. 'Just tying it up here, for now,' said Cassie, in the cricket-match commentator voice she had developed for Lucas to cover things she wasn't sure whether he would be able to see well or not.

'It's odd,' said Lucas. 'The owl didn't mind me touching her much at all. Just the dog.'

'You *touched* it?'

'Through my jacket. Did you get a -'

'I got a fruit crate,' said Cassie. 'Behind you. There were no gloves that I could see, but I brought a blanket.'

'Good. Good thinking. All right. You'll have to help me. How's his bleeding?'

'Whose?'

'Cole's!'

Cassie checked Cole's dressing. She wished the bandanna had been cleaner. It was already stained dark on the outside, but it was not dripping. 'Seems to be contained,' she said.

'And the owl?'

'It looks broken. His wing. I still don't see any blood.'

'Maybe the bullet bounced off.' Lucas had the sleeves of his jacket bunched backwards around his hands. He moved closer to the owl very slowly.

'Don't you want the blanket?' said Cassie.

'You're going to use the blanket,' said Lucas, his voice growing softer as he began to near the owl. Be careful of her feet! I'm going to get her head.'

The owl had its feathers all bristled out, but this seemed to be residual alarm from its brush with the dog rather than from Lucas's approach. The bird didn't pay him much attention, keeping its weapons faced towards Cole.

'How do you know it's a girl?' said Cassie.

'Because of her size.'

'They get *bigger*?' said Cassie.

'No, smaller. The females are about twice the size of the males.'

He was right next to the owl now. 'Hadn't I better do that?' said Cassie, feeling vaguely experienced due to being normally sighted and having opened a window for a peregrine falcon two and a half years earlier.

'No, I'll do it,' said Lucas, his voice sinking to a lilting sotto voce. 'She's spent the last twenty minutes with me, we have an understanding.'

'And you have a way with animals,' Cassie whispered sardonically, although she believed it outright.

'You just bring that fruit crate near, on its side, and be ready with the lid,' said Lucas. 'When I have the jacket on her head, throw the blanket over her back, and then pin her with the crate.'

'Have you done this before?'

'Yes.'

Cassie did not ask him to elaborate. With two humans now closing in, the eagle owl's hooting was reaching a dangerous crescendo. Lucas inched nearer, saying 'good owl, good owl,' in the bedside-manner voice he used with Ruby. He was right next to the bird now, shoulder to shoulder, both of them facing Cassie. 'We're going to do this very quickly,' said Lucas, whether to her or the owl it was hard to say. In a movement which was somehow swift without being sudden, he enclosed the owl's head in the jacket. Cassie drew her breath in sharply through her teeth as she watched the owl pick up one foot and thrash the air with its talons. But there was something casual about the thrashing, something token, which stopped her from panicking as Lucas said 'Quick,' in a strained voice.

Cassie threw the blanket over the bird's back. Lucas pinned one end with his knee, Cassie pinned the other end with her foot, and in the second's gap that Lucas lifted the jacket from the owl's head, she plonked the crate down on top of it. It fit. Just.

Lucas rose from his knees and sat down on the crate on top of his jacket in one movement. He smiled beatifically.

'Watch the slats,' said Cassie.

'Lid,' said Lucas.



Together they inched the lid beneath the crate, Lucas lifting his weight by increments to allow it underneath. The owl complained at this further torment, but was eventually boxed in on all sides, standing on the lid.

'This is going to be a very long walk,' said Lucas.

'He's bashing about a lot less than I would have thought,' said Cassie. 'Do you think he's very weak?'

'It might be that,' said Lucas. 'But it might also be because this is not her first time in a box. I have a strong suspicion that she's hand-reared. This type of owl isn't native to these parts. She must have escaped, or been set free. That's very likely why she didn't know to hide herself better when the poachers decided to use her for target practice. Not to mention why she's more alarmed by dogs than people.'

'You think they shot her on purpose?'

'I'm afraid they probably did, Cassie.'

'Wouldn't they be scared of being fined if they were caught?' said Cassie, incensed that Lucas seemed to have taken this as a naively sentimental question. 'I mean, aren't they protected?'

'Quite the opposite. Eagle owls are pests. More than pests, they're a menace. They can take livestock.'

'Oh,' said Cassie. 'Is your father going to be happy about this in that case?'

'He's used to it,' said Lucas, grinning.

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'An eagle owl?' said George Carmichael. 'Not back five minutes and you turn up an eagle owl?'

'The poachers were after it,' said Lucas.

'I'll have to tell Tom to set some mantraps,' said George. Cassie was fairly sure he was joking about this.

It had taken them the better part of an hour to get the owl to Tom's house and deliver it safely into his keeping. 'Lu'ul Saint Fraaahncis,' he had said, laughing and then spitting the byproducts of his merriment into his handkerchief. 'A bloody eagle owl.'

It was generally agreed that this was very likely the reason that they had been seeing more barn owls: the territorial eagle owl had scared them all off their own hunting grounds.

They were back at the farmstead now, where the family had gathered in the kitchen to start supper. Cassie talked with Jean and her other sons while George and Lucas cleaned and redressed Cole's wound. George offered to 'throw' some stitches into it, but Lucas said he would prefer to take him down to the vet.

'Well,' said Lucas when they had finished tending to his dog. 'You've missed the last shuttle, I'm afraid.'

'I realise,' said Cassie.

'We'll have to put you up.'

'Oh dear,' said Cassie. 'I'm sorry for the bother.'

'It's all right,' said Toby. 'I'm going down to see Roberta, I'll take you into town.'

'In what?' said Chris.

'Your van.'

'Is that a fact?' said Chris.

'I would take Dad's car,' said Toby. 'But Roberta and I can stretch out better in yours.'

'Tobias, don't torment your darling mother,' said George Carmichael.

Cassie was invited (and Toby instructed) to dine with them before they left for town. Already imposing on them for a lift, she did not feel inclined to hurry the family as they sat down to their roast chicken and discussed the work to be done on the farm the next day. A cow, also called Roberta (to long-standing amusement), was expected to calve any minute; George wanted to know if Lucas would be around to assist her at the crucial moment.

'Not if it's tomorrow,' said Lucas. 'I'm leaving early to see John Shaeach.'

'All right then. How is he doing?'

'Not very well, I gather.'

'Is Susannah going with you this time?' said Chris.

'She is not.'

'Perhaps you'd better leave well enough alone, Luke,' said Jean.

'Perhaps.'

Toby and Chris; their father between them and so clear in them, the three pairs of heavy clay-coloured eyebrows. Lucas was more like his mother, in colouring if not in build, and Cassie had the feeling they were close. She noticed that Jean touched her eldest son every time she passed him, brushing his shoulder or his hair. It was probably just because he had been away and the others hadn't.

'When are you off to London, lad?' she said to him.

'Only in September.'

'Did he tell you, Cassie, they're going to be playing his music?' said Jean Carmichael.

'He didn't!' said Cassie. 'You didn't tell me, Lucas. They're playing the stuff you've been working on here? The jazz?'

'He's going to play it,' said Jean. 'Luke is the soloist. The orchestra is going to accompany him.'

'But, that's unbelievable. I can't even begin to imagine how you must feel.'

Lucas smiled lop-sidedly. 'A little apprehensive.'

'He's thrilled off his rocker,' said Chris.

'I'm extraordinarily fashionable,' said Lucas, without bitterness, if also without humour.

'Now, Luke,' said Jean. 'That's got nothing to do with anything and it's bad grace to say it does.'

Cassie had wondered before why, at odd moments, Jean put her in mind of Dianne Loudon. Physically, they could not have been more different. She suspected the thing that united them in her mind was the fact that neither would tell her not to douse her entire head under the garden tap, or not to roll her hockey-shirt sleeves up over her shoulders, as her own mother did, and that both dressed their menfolk in great, thick, scratchy, character-building Aran jumpers.

Also, both were excellent at baking. After her meal, Cassie was made to eat a bowl of sticky toffee pudding, and it was nearing eight-thirty when she finally left the house with Toby.

Chris's van was parked by the schoolhouse, and she and Toby had a pleasant walk of it up the farm road to the Shire. Passing Sycamore House, they ran into Aaltje and Cameron.

'Oh!' said Aaltje. 'Cassie.' Her eyes wandered over Cassie's shoulders. She didn't say it, but Cameron did: 'Wheeeere's Silveeeeirrrra?'

'In town,' said Cassie, to Aaltje.

'Ah.' She did not say, what are you doing here without him?

'Lucas and I found an eagle owl,' said Cassie.

'An eagle owl?'

'It's at Tom's, in case you want to go look. It's worth the effort.'

It was almost ten when Toby finally dropped Cassie at her father's gate. He came outside as she walked up the drive.

'Where have you been?' he said.

'At Kilgry,' said Cassie. 'With the Carmichaels.'

'Why was your phone off?'

'It wasn't. There's not much reception. Why didn't you phone Justin?'

'I did. He said he left you at the Carmichaels' place *hours* ago.'

'I missed the shuttle.'

'Why didn't you phone?'

I'm twenty-three years old, she thought, making an effort to miss the hurt in his voice and hear only the accusation. 'I'm sorry,' she said.

He nodded. It was the closest he had come to losing his temper that she could remember, at least since her childhood.

'Your friend Mia called for you from London,' said her father. 'She said to tell you happy birthday.'

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Even though Cassie had Chris Carmichael's computer set up in her room in Cramond, she did not break her habit of coming over to Marchmont after work.

'Oh, it's you,' said Rex, opening the door for her that Wednesday. He appeared to be on his way out. 'It's Cassie,' he shouted to Justin, as if he had just proved a point. 'Well I suppose I'll see you later, eh?' said Rex, unsmilingly, and left down the stairs behind her. He had either not noticed or did not care that over his jeans he was wearing a dressing-gown.

Justin was sitting on the living room floor, packaging and labelling CDs.

'What's up with Rex?' said Cassie.

'He's being an idiot,' said Justin.

Cassie made a space on the living room couch and sat down.

'What are those?' she said, looking at the CDs.

'Demos.'

To everyone's approval, Cormac Murray, their old drummer from Cu Sith, had been discovered working in a music store in Leith, and after some gentle coaxing on Justin's part he had agreed to drum with them for a few sessions.

With this late addition, Same River Twice had now laid down an album's worth of material, although it was generally and cheerfully agreed that three quarters of it was abysmal. On the topic of what should be done about this, and whether the problem was that Justin was too soul-orientated, or Lucas too jazz-orientated, or Rex too rock-orientated, and on the topic of what should be included on the demo, Rex and Justin had passed several words that day.

'Isn't Rex still under contract?' said Cassie.

'Yes.'

'Then why are you sending out demos?'

'We can still get the music out there,' said Justin. 'We're just not going to credit Rex.'

'Is that legal?'

'No.'

'Oh.' She had already thought they were pushing their luck when Justin set up a page for the band on Myspace.

'Well. It depends what we do with it. There's no harm in seeing if we can spark some interest. It will take a while at best before anything happens, unless we get very lucky. And by the time something happens, *if* something happens, he'll likely as not be a free man.'

'You're not sending them to radio stations, then, I take it,' said Cassie. She stretched out a little more expansively on the couch, moving a brace of magazines to do so, and, as it was to hand, she began leafing through the latest NME.

'I am sending one to Fresh.'

Cassie widened her eyes above the magazine as if to say, your funeral. She levered her sneakers off and tucked her feet under the couch cushion.

'Cassie,' said Justin, with a kind of exasperated gentleness, the tension from his own concerns spilling over. 'Is there some reason that you don't go home?'

'I do go home,' said Cassie.

'Eventually.'

'Do I bother you, coming here?'

'No.' Not me, thought Justin.

In amongst the general, mutual and largely irrational venting session that had just passed between them, and which Justin knew they would dismiss later with no harm done, Rex had said that either Cassie must start paying rent, or she must stop acting as if she lived there.

They had been arguing about the music, and then about Susannah, and finally, because there was nothing left to say about the music or Susannah, they had started arguing about Cassie. 'I've got nothing against her,' Rex had said. 'Lovely girl. Great breasts. It's just that she's *always* here. I mean, are you ever going to get round to actually shagging her? And why does she come to *all* our recording sessions? What's the story with that? Who does she think she is, Yoko bleeding Ono?'

Justin had to concede the point.

He knew Rex did not dislike Cassie, had very little doubt that these questions, and probably their wording too, had filtered down from Susannah. For his part, he didn't mind that Cassie, well, not *followed him around*, because he invited her along to whatever he was doing if she happened to be there. But she did seem to happen to be there an awful lot, and had an awful lot to say about everything he, and Rex, and Lucas, and even Susannah, were doing - mostly what he, Justin, was doing - with their time. 'I just remember you saying you didn't want to be in that house.'

'That was a while ago.'

He paused, then put down the CD he had been labelling. 'I couldn't help but notice,' he said, 'that you elected to spend your entire birthday with someone else's family.'

Cassie put down the magazine, following his example. 'I missed the shuttle.'

'You also missed a lift down with me.'

She was a silent a moment. It was unlike him to confront her. From among the many responses that suggested themselves, she chose one that surprised both of them. 'You have no idea how different it is without you there.'

'Er,' said Justin. 'Different?'

'It's difficult. The atmosphere.' It was not just the fact that she felt isolated, out there in the sticks. How could she explain to Justin that when he had left, he had taken with him the great, fluffy, springy buffer of distraction and misdirection that lay between her and her father?

It was really thanks to Lynn that the situation was not a complete loss. Lynn mediated in Justin's place, made it possible for her to be at a table with her father without wishing she could crawl under it.

Cassie stayed in her room much of the time, working, and when she chatted, she chatted to Lynn.

'Are you arguing a lot?' said Justin.

'No.' They weren't arguing at all. 'It's just a bit strained.'

'It doesn't have anything to do with... you know...'

'No,' said Cassie. To her, this in itself was an admission. 'I never brought that up.'

Against his own interests, Justin encouraged her to bring it up. 'Have it out with him,' he said. 'Throw things. Shout.'

'We don't do things like that,' said Cassie. Besides, it wouldn't help.

The news that her father had had an affair, she had long since realised, was, oddly, only the most superficial cause of this strain. It had seemed like such an excellent explanation; for a while it had been convenient to believe that this was why they didn't gel; that somehow, this act lay behind everything.

There had, for another month, been a ready enough store of unpleasant things to imagine, memories to adjust, sentences to see in refreshed contexts, that she could avoid considering an alternative truth. Now, Cassie was beginning to discover that there were several discomfiting questions for which this neat explanation did not provide answers.

Why, for instance, did she have nothing against Lynn?

Surely she *should* have something against Lynn? Lynn had broken up their family. Even Justin had something against Lynn. He also had something against her father, but that was about something else. The things Justin had against all three of his parents were based on deep, unbreakable family bonds of mutual betrayal and disappointment. Still, they were bonds, and Cassie envied him.

'We just have too much in common,' she said to Justin.

The deeper problem was that the tension wasn't really tension at all. It was dead air.

This was not really something she had been prepared for by her upbringing and socialisation. It was all right to love one's father, and it was also all right to hate one's father, in the sense that people understood that there were many complex and potentially irresolvable conflicts that might lead to sound reasons for hating one's father. It was socially acceptable to bear massive unexplored burdens of resentment, blame and guilt towards one's father, or to have ruinous clashes of personality and ideals, or to never have forgiven him for abandoning one at the age of six and taken the family dog, or to wish he could accept one for who one was and not try to force one to sell Alfa Romeos or study applied mathematics. But for simply not having that much to say to one's father there did not seem to be a readily available precedent. The massive oppressive force in the house was, as she had thought,

the result of having to abandon her memories of him as a child, not because he had had an affair, but because she had realised that if they were not related, they would not have been friends.

'Have you decided for good that you're not going to go back to London?' said Justin.

'Yes,' said Cassie.

'Well look. You have a job now. I don't know how important it is to you to be saving, but you could move out.'

'Where?' said Cassie.

'You can move in with us.' He had not intended to say this. Rex had been making a point, not a suggestion. But he was soft-hearted, and had no defence against a show of need from a woman, especially a woman in need of rescuing. Besides, it might finally stop people talking if she lived with them officially, and, as Rex suggested, pay rent.

'In this place? There's no space.'

'We'll get a three-bedroom. Perhaps in Morningside.'

'But you haven't even finished unpacking *here!*' said Cassie. This was true. Several boxes in Justin's room had not yet had their duct tape cut.

'All the more reason,' said Justin. 'In addition, there is the rising damp.'

'I don't know,' said Cassie. 'You two are very noisy. How would I work?'

Justin frowned, his gift horse being looked in the mouth. 'Well, the offer's open,' he said curtly.

'Thanks,' said Cassie.

She was so much like him in other ways, she feared she would turn out like him in this respect too: that her relationship with her husband, her children, would be stilted and cluttered.

Because she didn't get on too well with her mother, she had imagined, back in South Africa, that she got on very well with her father. She was emailing her mother more often now. She even missed Nathalie occasionally, as she had occasionally missed her father when she was in South Africa.

She had not yet succeeded in apologising for the Other Thing. Let alone in confronting her mother about leaving her there in London when the Other Thing happened. That, as far as she was concerned, could comfortably wait until she was back in South Africa. Possibly until her mother was on her deathbed.

Was this the best that could be said of her relationship with her parents? she thought. That they got on fine as long as they weren't in the same country?

She began putting her shoes back on.

'Oh, come on,' said Justin. 'Don't be like that. I didn't mean I wanted you to leave.'

'I should go home,' said Cassie. 'You're right.'

On her way home, Cassie thought again of the warm glow she had felt when she and her father had fought over her job at the bar, and wondered whether it mightn't have been the reward of experiencing

something solid, something catching and gripping, for once; a sense of friction between their inner worlds. it occurred to her that it was not impossible that she had kept the job at Quigley's, or at least, liked keeping the job at Quigley's, because she had wanted to shove him around a bit, knock him off balance, just to see how he would react.

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Nobody tells you how to make two-year relationships, two year emotions, two year loyalties, thought Helena as she packed, choosing between two pairs of shoes and wondering if either would conceivably fit her friend Tamara.

She had said goodbye to Mr. Davenport the previous afternoon. For Helena, it had been harder than she expected, which she had expected. For Mr. Davenport it had been one of his bad days cognitively speaking, and one of his good days emotionally speaking, and it was probably all for the best that when she had told him this was the last time she would see him, he had only murmured, 'that's what you always say.'

She had sworn in her replacement on the morning of that day, giving her the six page list of instructions, warnings, tips, contingency plans and emergency measures over which she had laboured the night before with a fastidiousness that exasperated her at the time, but for which she was now glad. The replacement, a Kiwi girl with a high pony and a build like a yoga mat, had Helena slightly concerned. She was upbeat and sunny, which was fine, but being upbeat and sunny did not serve one equally well in all weather with Mr. Davenport.

Helena had managed to get all her books in one suitcase, except for her Lewis Carroll anthology. This was not because the anthology wouldn't fit, but because she couldn't find it. She cast about in her memory, and it yielded up an image of the six or seven glossy brushstrokes that had composed the book's red binding in the painting Mia had made of her employer. Following the logic of this beacon, she went through the door opposite, and began an excavating expedition through the huge drifts of paper and clothing beneath which Mia's room could be found.

Mia. What could she really do? She knew very well how pointless it would be for her to attempt a second heart-to-heart. The girl would have set herself against anything Helena had to say now.

This party of numinous dabblers was one thing, but she was more worried about that other creature, Rudolph Victor Adamus, and what might come of, or how he might serve himself of, the apotheosis he had evidently undergone in her little sister's nubile imagination.

In keeping with tradition, their father had been the original idol. Kristoff de Villiers, *plaasseun*, scholar, lawyer, all things to all men, equally at ease amongst farmers, labourers, academics, armchair theologians. He could talk about the rain, he could talk about the soul, he could do it in English, Afrikaans, Latin, German and, if pressed, Xhosa. He could tell stories. He could conjure heffalumps and *kabouters* and talking dogs. When the cousins gathered for the December holidays at their grandparents smallholding in the Karoo, it was Kristoff who had been by day the endlessly obliging steed, or pirate, or arch-villain, or goalie, and by night, the teller of stories. *En toe kom ons by 'n groot yster hek*. A roomful of them in sleeping bags, held in thrall by the man crouched in the middle of the

room with a torch illuminating his face from underneath, wondering what would happen next, what would happen tonight. Many had admired him; Mia had worshipped him.

As we grow larger, we need larger gods, thought Helena, her hands folding clothes, her mind expatiating fitfully on the potential destinies that Victor Adamus might be inclined to tailor for her little sister.

She had cleared the bed now, the sketchpads and clothes stacked in a series of ziggurats at her feet. She frowned. Mia had been spending the nights here in Tooting quite regularly of late, and the mess she had just cleared up was an institutionalised mess.

Where had Mia been sleeping? On the floor? In the lounge?

At least, from now on, she would be in Matthew's care, thought Helena, moving on to the drawers in the faux baroque bureau. Thank God for Matthew. Ah. Here it was, after all.

She took the book from the drawer, and opened it, ruminatively, to her father's *ex libris*.

Kristoff de Villiers, all things to all *men*. But he was at one remove from minds made of soil and egos fenced with bobwire, and he could not handle his wife and her four small daughters, clamouring, united, progressive, *female*, could not handle the trebuchets their mother had slung at his worldview.

Not such a great god then, in the end. And there had not been another until now. But there had been men, oh yes, and boys. Mia was never short of those.

She had ravined through them, collecting and then discarding them like spent matches, as if she could hardly wait to be rid of them, as if she hoped to sustain a perpetual balancing act: never alone, never in a position where she might be abandoned a third time. Until now. Until Matt.

Helena was now holding a leaf of foolscap covered in Mia's writing. She had continued going through the drawer quite unconsciously; it was Inneke directing her hands – the thought of reporting to her mother, as she would, that there was once again reason to be worried.

She recognised the work as Mia's only by the little procession of mutant creatures she had doodled to accompany the writing; these compulsive margin familiars of hers, at least, had not changed. The handwriting itself she would not have known. But then, she could not recall having seen a substantial example of her sister's hand in a good while. Perhaps it was not so odd that it should have transformed along with the rest of her.

The writing appeared to be a list of objects or symbols to be included in the various tarot cards she was painting. But near the bottom of the page was something that looked like a transcript of a dialogue.

Why can't I finish it?

You can, but you shouldn't.

Why shouldn't I finish it?

I told you.

I am going to finish it.

I warn you.

What's behind the door?

She had written in English. That was another thing, thought Helena. She was perfectly aware that she had once or twice provoked Mia's temper merely to hear her speak her own language. To get her to leap across that gulf, if only for a moment, if only to snap or shout. Mia's mother tongue had simply not kept pace with the overzealous spannishing of her personality. She was more herself in English now, this new self, and Helena had gladly traded amity for these piquant moments when her little sister was her little sister again.

She moved on to the next drawer, beginning to feel slightly guilty as she opened a photo envelope. If there were any photos Mia had not already shown her, it was probably with good reason.

There were two photos in the envelope, and Helena now knew which set it came from. The rest she had indeed been shown – they were, in fact, on the kitchen wall downstairs – but not this one. The first was a picture of Sam, looking down at his hands with a soft expression that clawed at her heart. She could only imagine how it clawed at Mia's. Still, she thought. *Still*.

When she first arrived, Mia had thrown herself into this great machine of a city with a fervour that made her older sister smile in nostalgic empathy. Growing up in Stellenbosch had made them both greedy for the world. The first few weeks were a head-long rush, a frenzied battle to slough off the past as quickly as possible. Go ahead, get rid of it, she had thought to herself when Mia had returned home from her fourth consecutive night out on the tiles and collapsed, resplendently drunk, on the kitchen floor. Now she worried that Mia had been trying, was still trying, to get rid of far more than her claustrophobic upbringing.

She remembered the September morning in Stellenbosch she had watched Mia disappearing into her room, her hurt trailing like a bridal train behind her. She had not come out for an entire day, and at last Inneke had dispatched Helena to try and draw her out. If not out of the room, then at least out of her silence. They had both guessed what had happened.

'Ma said to tell you supper's ready,' Helena said, standing in the doorway.

'Thanks.' Mia was painting. That was a good sign; Helena had expected to find her in bed.

Helena entered and closed the door behind her.

'What's this?' she said, conversationally. 'It doesn't look like your usual style.'

'Just something I was messing around with.'

It was an abstract piece, Helena saw, alike to Mia's usual work only in that it made her feel uncomfortable.

Mia stood staring at the canvas with a palette knife in her hand. The paint was not yet dry.

'Listen –' began Helena, and then she started, as, before her eyes, Mia raised the palette knife and, with brute force, punched a hole straight through the centre of the furious grey-green form she had painted, and another, and another. 'What are you doing?' said Helena.

Mia shrugged, her voice and her shoulders apathetic, but her hand vicious with the knife. 'I don't need it anymore,' she said. She cast aside the dull palette knife, picked up a Stanley knife from the tool tray beside her, and methodically she began lacerating the canvas. 'What's the matter with you?' said Helena. Mia continued shredding, giving no sign that she had heard. 'Is it Sam?'

'What do you mean?' said Mia. 'Is what Sam?'

'Mia, I know about you and him.'

'Oh? What do you know?'

What did she know? Helena knew that her sister had been waiting for Samuel Loudon for the better part of the last five years. Waiting for him to allow for the possibility that she might be more than a friend to him, a good friend, a best friend. She also knew, or was sure, that it had happened, at long last. For the past few weeks Mia had been a different person. It was as if someone had switched on the lights on a Christmas tree. She could not say what exactly, or when, but *something* had happened between them. Or as Sonya had put it; you can smell it a mile away. Either she's been possessed by Julie Andrews, or the hormones have finally kicked in between those two. And now, it was as if the plug had been pulled out. 'Did something go wrong?'

Mia remained mute, but the renewed vigour with which she attacked the canvas was answer enough. It was not lost on Helena that Mia had waited for an audience before indulging in this little spectacle. An interlocutor.

'Talk to me, *kleinsus*. What is it?'

She put the knife down, to Helena's relief. 'He says he's *in love*,' she said, only the last two words in English, and these she overemphasised acerbically. 'He's only just met her. How can he be *in love*?'

'Who? He's only just met who?'

Mia pointed with her eyebrows over Helena's shoulder, across the room, and Helena followed her gaze to the painting that had latterly occupied Mia's old wooden easel, and was now leaning against the wall. It was the portrait of the quirky girl with the remarkable eyes who had modelled for Mia last term.

'Cassie?' said Helena disbelievingly. Helena had grown quite fond of her, and she and Inneke had both thought it likely, and favourable, that the two should end up friends. 'That girl has her head screwed on right,' Inneke had said to Mia after her first sitting; a phrase she had been known to apply to Helena herself.

Helena's impression of Cassie diverged somewhat from her mother's, due largely to one conversation. The first time they had exchanged words at any length, Cassie and Helena had tumbled into an unexpectedly impassioned debate, during which Cassie had voiced some very fervent opinions

(for a first year) about Virginia Woolf. Helena could no longer remember their essence, but the link was indelible, and it was because of this, perhaps, that Cassie Harris had remained fixed in Helena's mind as something of a blue stocking; cripplingly articulate, pre-emptively and pioneeringly tragic, and most likely, catastrophically intimidating to the opposite sex. Not, in other words, your average entrant to that consistently popular Stellenbosch degree, *Baccalaureus Petire Homini*. Not the type to stick a knife in a new friend's back over a boy.

'She didn't know,' said Mia, reading her thoughts, and deciding, thankfully, to reveal her own. 'It was sort of unofficial, me and Sam.' She picked up the shredded canvas and appraised it as if wondering whether the frame could do with some work too. 'It was sort of a secret.'

Already then, Mia's eyes, which had hitherto lain in her face like a pair of spring leaves, had that flinty sheen to them, the outer evidence of the chitin shell with which she had sheathed her heart ever since. Until now. Until Matt.

Helena was looking at the second photograph in the envelope now. It showed a girl with a mantid's triangular face, long-eyed, slim-lipped; a unique face which made one rethink one's idea of beauty. A droll, ironic set to her mouth, but even in black and white it seemed that her eyes were on fire. It was this picture more than the other that gave Helena the sense of loss; the sense that she was looking at someone she did not expect to see ever again.

Matt had offered to drive her to the airport that afternoon. Mia had apologised that she could not spare the time to accompany them, and now Helena thanked God for that, too. She could talk to him, alone.

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At twelve o'clock on Saturday, when the electricity crew had knocked off and the main entrance had just been locked, Mia heard the new buzzer ting. The intimidating new state-of-the-art security system had been installed that week (accompanied by several skull-rattling test runs of the various alarms) and Mia was still figuring out which button did what. She had told Sebastian she would meet him at Giornata at twelve thirty. He must have arrived early and come to collect her. She wiped her brushes and padded along the skywalk. The elevator was working now, but the stairs were quicker.

In the foyer, she looked at the security screen. It was Matt. She let him in.

'This is a nice surprise,' she said. 'What are you doing here?'

'I just thought I'd stop by on my way in from Gatwick.'

'It's hardly on your way. Did everything go okay with Helena?'

'Everything?'

'You know, was she in time and so on. No freak tornados.'

'Oh, yes. Fine. Are you very busy?'

'As always.'

'I wondered if I could take you out for lunch.'

'Oh, you know, Matt, I'm so behind schedule...'

'We could eat here. I could bring you something.'

'No, no. Let's go somewhere.'

They went to Brick Lane. Mia hoped Sebastian was not already en route. She would have to arrange to disappear into a bathroom and text him, if Matt would let go of her for an instant. He had held her hand all the way to the car, and was still touching her almost neurotically as he drove, lifting a hand from her thigh only to change gears, then returning it immediately. She was vexed by him, he was crowding her, she loved him, he needed her. As she had become accustomed to doing, she held the two together, affection and frustration, the two small animals worrying at each other in her head, neither violent enough an emotion to push through to a physical expression. And he remained, thankfully, oblivious.

When they left the car he took hold of her and kissed her.

You know that I love you, he said.

I love you, too.

When I arrived just now, he said.

Yes?

You looked disappointed.

I'm just stressed out.

She kissed him back and watched the splinters of umber jostling neatly between the beams of dark in his iris as the pupil she was focussing on dilated. Close them, she willed, but he didn't, so she kept looking into that black centre, that dark matter, and he into her, a tunnel for a tunnel, a void for a void.

It was not Matt's fault. Being with him was like seeing the movie after having read the book, trying to resist the urge to point out to anyone who will listen where parts have been changed, or left out, where they got something completely wrong, or not as you know it should be, and where they were right on the money. That was really at the heart of it, she supposed, there was nothing wrong with him, Matt, but she resented him anyway, for being almost, just a little bit, not quite exactly like Sam.

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The three of them, the boy and two girls – who in some moments of tipsy sentimentality, he had been known to refer to as ‘my two girls,’ with an arm slung around the waist of one and the shoulders of the other, as they left Bohemia, say, after a night’s gentle carousing – the three of them were in the water together at the same time for only about a half an hour that evening in November. Their heads above the waterline were talking, the sounds they made were summer sounds as eternal as the cicadas; the sound of laughter eked out between cold panting breaths, and gulps, and splashes, and the odd syllable caught and flung back by the mountainside. Their bodies below the water were sculling. Sam still held a handful of pebbles, and he launched his torso from the water with a waterpolo stroke long enough to skim one, spick spack plop. ‘Heh,’ he said, well pleased, and ducked under.

Two and a half minutes he was gone, and in that time, Mia said: ‘So, London, eh?’

And Cassie said: ‘That’s the plan.’

Mia said: ‘You’re going in January?’

‘If my work permit is cleared.’ She asked: ‘What are you going to do? Cape Town?’

‘Actually, I was thinking, I might join you guys.’

‘In London?’

‘Ja.’

‘Really?’

‘Sam suggested it.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes.’

‘He didn’t mention that.’

‘Didn’t he?’

Cassie didn’t answer, then suddenly her eyes widened, and her mouth opened, and Mia braced herself for the outrage. But instead, Cassie disappeared.

It took Mia a moment to realise what must have happened. Sam had swum up from underneath and grabbed her. The water so black, it was as if neither of them had ever existed, and she, Mia, had come there alone that day. Then she drew breath and dived herself. Their faces Butcher Boy pale, their hair streaming. Sam like a river god, like Neptune, and Cassie a constellation, Mia a satellite, a moon, a waning moon, an empty moon, a moon-fish, a water sprite, a lizard mole, the third flipper, the second fiddle, the first beast, the bridesmaid stripped bare by her bachelor, the whiplash girlchild in the dark.

And they rose together as Sam’s great lungs surrendered, the three of them rose, and Sam broke the surface, jubilant, resplendent, extant, skin, bone and muscles alive, alive-oh.

## Full Buck Moon

The painting shows a forest seen from within, from the height of a person, a smallish person. The light was depicted as if there was much dust in it, the hour about seven o' clock of a summer's day. The mirror on the wall opposite makes one feel one was within the forest, and the way the mirror image moves as one moves, with the dynamism of a reflection, makes it easy to believe this world is neverending.

From up here on the skywalk, with the painting lit from the ground, the viewer can easily imagine herself to be among treetops, waiting for some animal to feel safe enough to emerge from its hiding place among the trunks, or to leap down from the branches and land, heavy and soundless, on the sawdust-and-oil forest floor.

She was proud of that, the forest floor. From a distance it seemed as if she had been very clever in creating the illusion that it was three dimensional, but if one looked closely, it was no *trompe-l'oeil*. She had mixed handfuls of sawdust into the paint, and glued larger chips of wood onto the canvas itself before applying the mixture.

The wood shavings themselves came from some of the timber that had been used in the construction of the gallery. Mia was pleased by this too, the painting and its home sharing DNA.

It was the floodlights that gave the scene that wildlife-documentary feel. Mia was wondering if she might find some way to preserve the effect after they had taken away her lights, and whether Mr. Dyer would have anything to say about it if she did, when she heard Sebastian enter Room One below her.

He had left the gallery to get them some more cigarettes, and, as she watched – quietly, for she had never seen him alone in his own company before, and was intrigued – he stood for a moment looking appreciatively at the long empty space, the black tiles which had by now been laid throughout the building, and then he took off his highwayman's coat,

Sebastian did the last thing she expected: he made a little experimental hop, and upended himself. He walked half the length of Room One on his hands, righted himself again, and then, turning back to appraise the distance he had covered, he dusted his free hand off on his jersey, ruffled the hair on the back of his head, which was once again in need of a trim, and sloped back to the doorway to pick up the coat.

It was only the second time Mia had seen the energy of his eyes and what lay behind them given the run of his body. And this time it had been for the sake of nothing, and no one, but his own



enjoyment. Perhaps she would ask him to sit for her, after all, she thought. She eased back along the skywalk and down the stairs before he could catch her.

It had been decided that Mia's mural would be transferred to its final resting place in the foyer, even though she had not yet completed it, so that Room Three could be furnished.

At this point, the matter of the convex curvature on the foyer walls had become salient.

'It cuts the imperiousness of the space,' said Mr. Dyer.

'I wash my hands,' said Mr. Gudmundsson.

'You can't mount a rectangular canvas on a convex wall!' said Mia.

'Well it's done now,' said Mr. Dyer. 'They'll have to find a way.'

Mia called Victor. Victor called the building crew foreman and told him to replaster the wall.

At Mia's request, a professional mounting crew had been brought in for the installation. The building crew then provided Mia with some scaffolding so that she could go on working. She worked during the day with the drop-cloth hanging over the back of the scaffolding, so that her trees could have some privacy. There was enough light through the main entrance. She mixed enough paint before dark fell to be sure of the tones later on, when the light changed. For evening work, which she was obliged to do every night now, she had two industrial-strength floodlights.

It was by the light of these that Sebastian asked Mia if she would grant him one last favour.

'I'm very busy, Sebastian. What is it?' She flexed her hands, which she had been using more frequently than any of the brushes tonight. The paint broke free of the lines in her palms.

Mia felt the scaffolding shake, and a moment later he joined her on her platform, and passed her the box of cigarettes he had purchased for her. She thanked him, a little sheepish for having been short with him.

'We'd like to have a cast party,' said Sebastian. 'Just to round things off.' They had finished rehearsing that week.

'Aren't those traditionally held *after* the first run?' said Mia.

'This one's more of a meeting,' said Sebastian. 'To discuss our opening night. But we thought we'd turn it into a bit of a celebration, too. Just a few drinks.'

'Here?' said Mia.

'Well yes, you know, symbolically. We've all grown quite attached to this place. We'd like to toast it.'

'I don't know, Sebastian. How many people?'

'Just the cast, and some of the theatre people.'

'How many theatre people?'

'Just a few.'

'What night?'

Sebastian consulted the ceiling. 'How about the eleventh?'

'You have got to be joking.'

'I'll be your love slave,' said Sebastian.

'Be still, my beating heart.'

'This looks good, by the way,' said Sebastian, nodding towards the near-completed mural. It was the first comment he had made on the product of three months of painstaking exertion.

'Gracias,' said Mia.

On the night of the eleventh, Mia was forced, by Parkinson's Law, to declare the mural finished. She had only the glazing to do, now, and thought she could finish that by about ten, if the cast would give her a moment's peace. Dane and Ginger had arrived at seven, bearing plastic bags that clinked. Mia told them to mind the pelvis.

It was the only piece of art, besides the mural, that was already in the gallery: a huge sculpture of a globe showing the Pangaea continent, mounted on a female pelvis, that Nadia Petrovsky had donated for the benefit. The rest would be brought in during the day tomorrow.

The first guest arrived ten minutes later. He was short, and had a beard and half-moon glasses.

'Ah! The distinguished Professor!' said Dane. *Bienvenue*. Can I take your jacket? We have some brandy.'

'Thank you, I don't take alcohol after six,' said the man in a finicky voice.

'Who is that?' said Mia to Ginger.

'That's Noel Chandler,' said Ginger. 'The playwright.'

'I thought Dane wrote the play.'

'He's *another* playwright.'

Mia did not answer, because it had struck her that Dane himself had let Noel Chandler in. The security agent had not arrived yet. She tried to remember who was supposed to be on duty. She thought it might be Patrick, the black one. She wondered if she should call the security company and ask where he was. But Victor would find out if she did. He would, somehow.

Ginger and Dane were in Room One with the Distinguished Professor when the buzzer tinged again. Mia glanced at the CCTV screen to see Frankenstein's monster standing at the security door.

'Is the committee meeting here?' he said.

'Committee meeting?' said Mia through the intercom. 'You mean the party?'

'Ah, yes, that's right,' said the huge man. 'The *party*.'

'I think you might be confused -'

'Look, love,' the large man interrupted. 'Is Dane here? Dane Chevenix-Trench?'

'Yes,' said Mia, grateful to have one fact straight. She buzzed the door.

The newcomer pushed it open. 'It is the right place, lads!' he shouted over his shoulder, and to Mia's dismay no fewer than ten people emerged from the main entrance around the corner and trooped in as he held the door open for them with a hand that looked like something one would find on the floor of an abattoir.

'Hang on a minute,' said Mia. 'Who are you people?'

The man scowled down at her. 'I thought we had this sorted out now,' he said. 'Is this or is this not-'

'Ah! Evening Joe, glad you made it,' said Dane, appearing behind her. 'Right through here.'

'Dane, what's going on?' said Mia.

'Nothing to worry about,' said Dane.

'Who are all these people?'

'They're the events coordinators,' said Dane. 'For tomorrow night.'

Mia looked sceptically at the great slab of a man Dane had referred to as Joe. 'Security technician,' Dane soothed.

'Expecting a good turn-out, are you?' said Mia.

'Oh, there'll be scores of us, no fear,' said Joe impenetrably.

'Wh -'

'Yes! Well,' said Dane. 'Let's get started, shall we?'

'Hang on!' said Mia. She had just spotted the Turkish maitre d' from the Italian restaurant next door. 'That man owns a restaurant!' she fumed, pointing.

'Catering,' said Dane. Ginger sniggered openly, her teeth flashing in her dark face.

There was little she could do but follow them into Room One, feeling like an ox-pecker trying to get the attention of a herd of buffalo. 'Please, Dane, ask them to take their shoes off, and not to touch the walls... *O koek ...*' she could clearly hear the sound of something falling over and someone saying 'oops.'

The bell tinged again, and Mia went back to the foyer to see Sebastian beyond the glass. She buzzed him in. 'Seb, thank God,' she said. 'You have to get all these people out of here. Victor would -'

'Easy, there,' said Sebastian. 'Calm down, my mouse. What's the problem?'

'There's a whole lot of people here I don't know!'

'Ah, now, don't worry about them, they're harmless,' said Sebastian.

'You're in on this?'

'Mia, we'll be as quiet as lambs, I promise. There really is nothing to get all worked up about. Relax. Have a drink.'

Mia paused, allowing the swell of hubbub from the gallery to answer for her. Dane's voice could be heard intoning fruitily over it. 'Half of them are drunk already,' said Mia. 'Dane included.'

Sebastian walked across the foyer and put his head into gallery one. 'There are rather more people than I had expected,' he admitted.

'I have to get this glazing done.'

'How about this. You let us have our little gathering, and I'll help you finish the glazing after.'

Mia narrowed her eyes at him.

'We'll be out in two hours,' Sebastian coaxed.

'One.'

'One and a half.'

'Sebastian, you're not supposed to be here *at all*.'

'Okay, okay. One hour.'

'Fine.'

'Thank you, Mia. You're a brick.'

'Bugger off.'

The doorbell tinged again. Mia jumped. She glanced at the CCTV screen and saw a familiar Dickensian face staring up at the camera, appropriately black and white on the closed circuit screen, the pale curls which surrounded it tossing forlornly in the wind. He was wearing a too-large khaki jacket.

'Who is it?' said Sebastian.

'Jamie Lamington,' said Mia.

'You're late, Boy,' said Sebastian when he had entered.

'You'd better be the last,' said Mia.

'Ah, I –' said Jamie Lamington.

'Oh, go on, go on,' said Mia fractiously, waving both of them towards the gallery.

She returned to her scaffolding and went on with her work, half-listening to the echoed snatches of Dane's welcome address, which he was delivering from the skywalk, and during which he introduced the Distinguished Professor at rather too much length. '...It is here, from within the very belly of the beast, that we forge the girders of our Stand...' she heard. His voice was rising. 'And tomorrow we may say to those like Rudolph Victor Adamus who pick at the bones in the wake of the death of true art, who pay the pimps that prostitute the imagination... *Alea jacta est!*' A rather bored cheer went up from the crowd. People had started talking among themselves as he entered his last three paragraphs.

Mia dropped her glaze brush and swung down from the scaffolding. She could hear Jamie Lamington cheering, shrill and enthusiastic.

From the doorway to Room One, she saw Dane's blond curls bobbing on high and Jamie Lamington's blond curls bobbing below. Jamie Lamington in his black v-neck jersey. She had been very dim. The object of Jamie Lamington's ardent adulation was not Sebastian after all.

Mia had been standing near the edge of the crowd, but as the Professor began talking, (he declined the skywalk), the people jostled nearer, and gradually she was absorbed, assimilated. She looked around for Sebastian. Someone offered her a bottle of something, and said, you're doing the right thing. I salute your courage. She nodded distractedly.

The Professor spoke very briefly, and mostly in citations. Nevertheless, the applause he received far outshone Dane's. More toasts were made. My father came here with five pound in his pocket, the Turkish maitre d' was saying to Charles's chest, seemingly having haggled his sire's capital down during the preceding few weeks. The attention of Charles's head, well above everyone else's, was on the skywalk. Mia looked up. From inside the ruck of shoulders, she saw a pair of black-clad legs between the railings. Sebastian. Of course that was where he was. The eternal spectator.

She turned to locate the smoothest route to the stairs, and found herself face to face with the copiously hirsute, sideplate-sized hollow of Charles's armpit. *Nastarovia!* He shouted through to the foyer, a pint bottle raised, and brought his tricep down on Mia's head. She inhaled a tepid lungful of the fruits of his pores. It was with her senses thus obscured that she heard Sebastian's voice resounding from above. Two syllables, like gunshots.

'Boy! No!'

He, too, was facing the foyer.

Mia elbowed her way past Charles, through the crowd, and into the doorway. Her knees went weak beneath her. There stood Jamie Lamington, frozen like an inebriated deer in headlights, in his hand a can of spray paint.

Due to the angle of the wall, she could not, as yet, see what use the dread object had been put to. She could not see, would not see, did not want to see. But Sebastian, still up on the skywalk, had an excellent view, and as Mia turned to look at him she could see by his face that the news was poor. She felt faint. She steeled herself, stepped forward, around the wall, and saw what the hand of Jamie Lamington had wrought.

For the most part Mia had been a quiet child, but when she was quite a little girl she had been known to fly into tempers so sudden and violent and frankly awesome that the word 'tantrum' did not do them justice. They were rages, demonic, baroque rages, usually provoked by one or more of her sisters, and on one such occasion, as she had never been allowed to forget, she had broken Sonya's toe. The most recent of these had saved her life. The next took place now. For a fount of lava did flood her head, and her blood did bubble forth, and though she was but little, she was fierce. In two lightning bounds she was on him, and he bent before her as new corn before a gale.

Jamie Lamington was also small, and he was not fierce, but yielding and pliant. He was shielding his face with his hands. There was blood coming out from between his fingers. 'Ow, ow, ow! Stop!' he was weeping, but she didn't. Committee members began filtering through from Room One, to loiter at the edge of the foyer in the timeless flaccid pose of the curious onlooker.

'Lord love a duck, she's going to kill him,' said Joe the security technician reverently as Mia took Jamie Lamington's curls in one hand, formed a fist with the other, and smashed it into his wretched Disney-animal face. She was snarling like a lynx, still unleashing a torrent of swearwords in both her languages, and had her quarry cowering on his knees – she was, in fact, kicking him in the ribs –

when Sebastian flipped his legs over the railings of the skywalk and leaped down seven feet to the floor below, landing elegantly on all fours. A few people gasped.

Sadly, the leap was executed more impressively than the act it was meant to expedite. Sebastian's attempts to restrain Mia, while undeniably brave, proved largely ineffectual. He buckled with an oof sound as Mia elbowed him in the solar plexus, but he succeeded in grabbing her arm, as much to break his fall as to prevent her from using it. 'Run, Boy, save yourself!' he wheezed. Jamie Lamington continued to cower, staring with imbecilic horror at the blood dripping from his face and onto Victor Adamus's Spanish marble.

'Hadn't somebody better do something?' said Dane, lighting a cigarette edgily.

Several of those present looked at Joe. Grumbling, Joe glanced across at the fire hose behind the reception desk and back at the brawl. Dismissing this option with a regretful sigh, he lumbered over to the writhing knot composed of Sebastian and Mia, opened his arms, and simply engulfed both of them, muttering something along the lines of 'settle down, settle down.' Mia gathered herself into a ball, her feet leaving the ground, and the conglomeration overbalanced and toppled forward, creating a stupendous pile-up in ascending order of size, unhappily for Jamie Lamington, who was at the bottom.

Joe opened his arms and all four of them rolled like nine pins and came, at last, to rest.

Sebastian was first on his feet, and he went immediately to the aid of Mia's victim.

'You broke my dose, you bloody witch!' cried Jamie Lamington in a thick, high voice, clutching at Sebastian, his imitation-Dane faltering. 'I'll hab you dud! I'll hab you dud for assault!' He looked at Sebastian, having assumed that the physical support implied moral support. Sebastian's expression shifted from concern to disgust. He released Jamie Lamington's elbow roughly.

'You'll keep your gob shut if you know what's good for you, Pollyanna,' said Joe impassively, straightening his shirt. Jamie Lamington followed the large man's gaze to his own recent handiwork and wilted.

The only one still on the floor was Mia. She was lying on her back with both hands covering her eyes, the heels of her hands clenching either side of her head.

Sebastian marched across to Dane. The onlookers followed his progress across the foyer eagerly, saucer-eyed, awaiting his next trick.

'Get them out Dane,' said Sebastian, sotto voce.

'Let's all just calm down and talk about this,' said Dane.

'Get them out right now or I'll tell them you went to Harrow.'

'Right! Everyone out,' said Dane loudly.

There was no immediate response from the crowd.

'You 'eard 'im,' said Joe. 'Show's over.'

Grudgingly the erstwhile committee began shuffling towards the exit, a few returning first to Room One to pick up coats and bags and half-empty bottles.

Mia lay on the floor with her hands over her eyes, so all that all she could hear were the voices, the room growing gradually quieter, as if the volume were being turned down on a radio, or as if she were drifting further and further away from it. Perhaps she had finally accomplished astral travel. Perhaps she was dying. I'm telling you, she heard through the roaring in her ears. I'm telling you.

After a while she realised with dim disappointment that it was only the building itself growing quieter as the crowd emptied out onto the street. I'm telling you, I'm telling you, it's going to be a farce, they'll be clamouring for their money back at the door, said someone walking past her.

It's a paper house, she heard someone answering.

Then they will riot.

One can dream.

Hobgoblin laughter.

Ah don't know nuffink, ah don't want to know *nuffink*, just give me it, and I'll go.

That was Patrick, the security guard. He was outside.

At last there were only two voices left: Sebastian's, sounding unusually terse, layered with Dane's unmistakable next-up-Jeffrey-with-the-weather tones. She tuned back in, fell back down into her body, reluctantly. Sorry everything went pear-shaped. Let's keep it within the ranks as much as possible, shall we? No serious harm done after all, best for everyone concerned if we...

Was Dane blind? She thought. 'No serious harm done?' 'Keep it within the ranks?' It was announcing itself in six-inch red letters right in front of them, and it would do so tomorrow as well.

Looks like that femme-bot of yours has short-circuited.

She'll be fine.

Hope you're not in too much trouble. Well, I'd best be off. I've told the little fucker I'll run him to the hospital.

Fine.

Right. Good luck, old son. She heard the door engage and the street-noises went dead. The hollow silence of the room was then pierced only by the sound of a moth or some other large soft insect hurling itself with masochistic fervour at one of her floodlights, the sound of Diego Rivera turning in his grave, and Sebastian's footfalls crossing the cold floor and coming to a halt beside her.

'Mia?' His voice came from beside, not above; he must have sat or crouched down. She could hear him breathing. The moth going tat-tat-tat against the light. 'Mia, are you there?'

And Chuck said God is an Indian-giver, I don't trust nothin' but the Mississippi River. 'No.'

'Come on. You have to open your eyes sometime.'

'I don't see why.'

'You're just going to lie here?'

'That is my intention, yes.'

'Forever?'

'No, just until I die. I'm sure they'll dispose of my remains at some point.'

'Well, then.'

Shifting noises. When he spoke again, his voice was right by her ear. 'That vaulted ceiling is a bit much, isn't it,' he said. There was a long silence. The moth had either given up on or succeeded in becoming one with the light.

Sebastian, prostrate beside Mia, was cautious of her calm, thinking that perhaps this was the eye of the storm, and very aware of the fact that he was the only prospective victim within reach. As her inaction continued without hint of reprieve, he began to wonder if she may have just given up, like the surviving half of a geriatric couple who lies down and simply expires.

But in fact Mia was calm because beneath the shock and subsiding rage, she had discovered a little calm spot of, not quite relief, but an absence of dread. The Something had happened, and she had survived it. Well, so far. There was still tomorrow to get through. 'I'm sorry,' said Sebastian.

There was another long silence. Mia found her mind alighting on images rather than following a train of words. Dane offering her a shot of absinthe. Victor Adamus in his hard hat. Fillette with her eyes smugly lowered in the restaurant.

Sebastian swinging from the cables, asking her what night the gallery was opening.

'Do you ever find,' she said, 'that sometimes when people apologise it makes things worse? Like, it makes you hate them, when before, you were just angry with them?'

'I don't think I have had that experience,' said Sebastian. 'I usually find that I just forgive them immediately, like magic.'

'Sure you do.'

A third long silence, like a rest between movements in a symphony. 'I know you don't forgive me,' said Sebastian. 'And you can hate me if you like. But if you could possibly wait until tomorrow to start hating me, we need to do something about this graffiti.'

Mia opened her eyes then, and side by side they lay on their backs in the very belly of the beast staring up into the dim recesses of Victor's vaulted ambition. She turned her head to look at Sebastian's profile. The marble floor was cool against her cheek. 'There is nothing that can be done about that graffiti by tomorrow.'

Sebastian angled his face to meet her eye. His own had gone dark, as if they had absorbed some of the darkness of the surface beneath them. 'We can fix it. We're going to find a way.'

'There is no way.'

'Tell me, in theory, as it were. Given unlimited resources. What needs to be done to fix it?'

Mia sighed. 'I don't know.'

'Can you paint over it?'



'Don't be stupid.'

'Okay, no, then. So it has to come off. Presumably we're going to need some sort of a solvent.'

'Anything that can eat through spray-paint will eat through the painting too.' Even saying something this practical, albeit in the negative, was like a huge exhausting weight. It felt too much like the beginning of Dealing With It.

'Hmm,' said Sebastian. 'And if we do it just very lightly?'

'Some of the paint will go with it, Seb. Just take that as a given.'

'And then you would repaint it.'

'It's not that simple.'

'Why not?'

She sighed, gathered herself for the next sentence. 'Because the glaze is on already. Whatever I repaint can't be made to blend with the rest of the painting. And secondly, if I repaint, I need to reglaze. And I can't reglaze until the oil paint is dry.'

'Hmm,' said Sebastian. 'We'll be needing to get around that somehow.'

'You don't say.'

Sebastian's phone rang and he spoke to Dane.

'Did I really break his nose?' said Mia when he had signed off.

'You really did.'

'Oh.'

'So. Come. Brainstorm.'

'Look, it's useless speculating when we don't even know what he used.'

'Done,' said Seb, and held the can of spray-paint in the air where she could see it.

'Where did that come from?' said Mia, taking it.

'It rolled behind the reception desk.' He sat up and took his cell phone from his pocket again.

'Who are you calling?' said Mia.

'Gaz.'

'And who is Gaz?'

'Friend of mine who owns a bike shop.'

'What do we want with a bike shop?'

'He knows about spray-paint.'

Still on her back, Mia half-listened as Sebastian slipped into lad-patter, outlining their plight. He clicked his fingers at her to get her attention and held out his hand for the can. She passed it to him. 'Polyurethane... it's on an oil painting. Yeh, mate, an oil painting..... Uh-huh. Uh-huh. It's been on about an hour. There's a glaze... Mia what's the glaze stuff made out of?'

'It's Zinzer. Latex.'

'Latex. Uh huh. Look, mate, I'll pay you a hundred quid, yeh?...You're kidding me. All right fine. Two hundred.'

Mia sat up and faced the mural. What a sure hand Jamie Lamington had with a rattle can, she thought, regarding the bold red capitals running rampant across the delicate trunks of her trees.

**TEETATAE!**, they read.

It was not a bad gag for a drunken little prat. Anyone entering the building by the main entrance, facing the reception desk, would see the mirror image first: Alea lacta Est. A pity, almost, that he had been interrupted before he managed to finish the last letter. At least one statement could have been carried off as it was intended.

Sebastian rang off. He sat up beside her, following her gaze to the mural. 'But is it *art*?' he said.

Mia was kind enough to laugh bitterly. 'What does Gaz say?' she said.

'Apparently the thing to do is apply a poultice,' said Sebastian.

'A poultice. Right.'

'With chemicals.'

'Chemicals, I see.'

'He's never done it on this surface before, but he's going to come and see what he can do.'

'For two hundred pounds.'

'I'll pay it.'

'You're damn straight you will.'

They faced the mural together, elbows on knees, as if waiting for the credits to roll. 'There you have it,' he said levelly. 'The lioness is cast.'

They began stripping the spraypaint at one in the morning.

Gaz, who was gelled and pugfaced and tired about the eyes, had helped them apply the poultice, given them instructions for its removal, and left.

There were two hours during which they had to wait for the chemical solution to take effect, and during this time, they talked. Or, to begin with, for a change, Mia talked, and Sebastian listened.

She informed him that he was the most utterly selfish person she had ever met, that he was irresponsible, self-absorbed, arrogant, insecure, pretentious, conceited, condescending, manipulative, blunt, abrasive, immature. She explained that he was a liar, a wannabe, a scenester, a fraud, a reprobate, a *windgat*, a *gatkruiper*, a firebrand, a leach, a fop, a bounder, a cad, a player, a knave, a spoilt brat, a closet mummy's boy, a shiftless layabout, a menace to society, a rebel without a cause.

He took his punishment stoically, offering no defence. When she had run out of steam, she demanded he tell her what on earth had happened that night, exactly, and why.

Sebastian did.

The Adamus Trust was founded by Rudolph Victor Adamus I, he said, and it was under its auspices that several projects like the gallery had been undertaken before.

'Like the gallery?'

'Peace offerings. To appease the communities he was destroying. In his father's time, it was the Docklands Corporation. Now R.V.A. Beta has turned his attention here.'

The Adamus Trust was a swearword, its funds blood money, and its every effort sneered at. 'Here a community centre, there a greenbelt, yon a scholarship fund. And for every inch he gave, he took a mile. The thing is, he's pissed off the wrong crowd this time, or so it may turn out. This area is like a nature reserve for artistic types. They are voluble and educated and in some cases quite influential. There's going to be an interesting spectrum of true colours revealed come tomorrow night.'

Mia grimaced. 'And I've cast my ballot, or gauntlet, or hatchet, or lioness, or whatever the hell it's called, with the wrong side.'

'You weren't to know, Mia.'

They had started peeling the poultice now. A little bit of Mia's mind hoped the spray-paint wouldn't come off now that she did know, and it hung heavy between them: she would have known if he had told her. This was all wrong, she thought. This couldn't be so.

'Look,' said Sebastian. 'I'm probably making too much of the whole affair, it's more than likely that my sense of proportion has been distorted by Dane shouting this stuff in my ears every day.'

'What's his beef with Victor, anyway?'

'Nothing personal.'

'Could have fooled me.'

'He just needs an Anti-Christ, and our man Victor fits the bill... Would you look at *that*!'

He was holding up the largest single strip of poultice either of them had yet managed to remove.

'It's not a competition, Sebastian,' said Mia.

'But if it was, I would be winning.'

'It's actually coming right,' said Mia, dolefully. 'I can't believe you wriggled your way out of this.'

Sebastian smiled, peeling. 'Born and bred in a briar patch, Brer Fox.'

'No you weren't. You were born and bred in the lap of establishment.'

They were both a little giddy on the poultice fumes.

'Maintain low tones.' He smiled at her self-deprecatingly. Mia empathised. She didn't come from money, but she came from brains, which was as bad in its way, and she could understand the desire to climb out from under your breeding.

They had to strip the glaze, and then she retouched the paint while Sebastian talked to keep her company, about the relative merits of Anthony Hopkins vs. Laurence Olivier, of Captain Kirk vs. Captain Picard, of Marmite vs. Bovril. She realised that she had missed it while he was rehearsing, this thing where he talked on and on, and she listened, or not, as her work and her mood dictated.

As they began reglazing, it started to rain.

It was the first time the skylight has been rained on with them under it, and when it started they both stopped mid-stroke, hunching by reflex against the threat of attack from above. It sounded like artillery, or like war drums. More like Cape rain than anything Mia had yet heard in London.

It was four in the morning.

'You might as well go and get some sleep, Seb,' said Mia. 'It's your opening tomorrow night.'

'It's yours, too.'

'But I can sleep all day if I like. You've got your dress rehearsal.'

'Sod my dress rehearsal.'

'You can't not go to your dress rehearsal.'

'I'll go, never fear. I will prevail by the grace of the twin gods Caffeine and Nicotine. My character's supposed to be neurotic anyway.'

'And perform that night? On no sleep?'

'Oh, Mia, it's a crap play anyway. Pure agit-prop for a bygone age. I'm only doing it because Dane's a friend and I need the exposure. I don't think he even cares about it that much, it's just a vehicle for the rally.'

'The rally.'

'The rally,' Sebastian admitted.

The work was all but done, and they had long since run out of cigarettes, when he said, 'you can doss at mine.'

'Hm?'

'You can sleep at my place.'

'Since when do you have a place?'

'It was my father's doing.'

'I think I'll just go home.'

'It's four-thirty a.m.'

'I'll take a night bus.'

'It's raining stair-rods, Mia.'

'It will be raining stair-rods on the way to your place too,' said Mia. 'Or has Père Maddox also bought you a car?'

'No, he hasn't. But my place is near here. It's not safe, you'll have to stand on that corner in Tooting all alone to get the second bus, you know you will.'

Mia briefly considered waking Matt. But he had an exam the next day, and his sleep hours, scheduled to the minute, were more precious than either of theirs. 'A real gentleman would offer to see me home instead of trying to lure me to his pad,' she said.

'Good thing I'm not a real gentleman. If you come with me I might still get three hours in before call-time. If I see you home I can forget about it.'

'You go on then. I'll be fine.'

'I won't hear of it.'

'Make up your mind. Are you a gentleman or not?'

'I'll be gentle.'

'I can take care of myself,' said Mia, small but fierce.

Sebastian grinned. 'Then you'll have no trouble fending me off.'

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Mia riding out of the Wilgenhof grounds and the Willows boys leering down from the balcony and dropping spit bombs – their air rifles aren't handy today – cat-calling and wolf-whistling and hooting like baboons, Breakfast run, breakfast run. Damn you Werner, you said you would keep your mouth shut. It is not five minutes since he lowered her out of the window of his room and already he has spread the word through section B. *Bekfluitjie*, she calls back, and then she pedals away on her village bicycle, ass off the seat, thighs pumping. Their faces and lolling arms are already gone from the balcony when she glances back. Run for it.

Damn that Werner and damn all of them to hell, her voracious four-year streak of rebounds, her self-defeating revenge, all of them before and after, the life sentence enclosed on either side by the parentheses that are Sam and Matt, the two good men. It might be twenty-five or it might be thirty, which means thirty-one now, she's not sure, at any rate it's enough to make them indistinguishable. Not anonymous, exactly, because she has a good memory for names and could list them if pressed. But things more important than names have been forgotten or blurred. What it felt like to give a damn about it, for one. Did this circumcised member go with that Velcro snore? Did this one tell her 'fank you' right after, his face still frozen in the stern sincerity of climax, or was that the other one, who strained valiantly like Braveheart being tortured by the nefarious henchmen of King Longshanks as he huffed his beer-breathed last? She remembers the sensation of being plumped like a pillow, she remembers a smell like camembert cheese left in the sun at a picnic. The images and sounds and smells, oh especially the smells, are vivid but elusive, timeless but homeless. Orphaned, widowed, divorced. This fank you, that rugburn, the other mop-topped head raised to ask her if she had been tested recently. And Maria de Villiers, colliding with life, encountered the fate she had wrought for herself as an exclamation point encounters a question mark, that comic book speech bubble combination, not acceptable in essays, and yet it describes so much, why should she be told to do without it.

*Mia!?*

Samuel Loudon's last word to her. Sam's last punctuation marks.

Sam, of course, was the first, and there's nothing about him that she remembers less than perfectly. There can be no confusion as to the scent of jasmine outside his window, his wholegrain shoulders, his laughter at his clumsiness, her laughter at the pain, the taste of his seventeen-year-old sweat clean and blameless as an animal's, his miraculous hands with their twelve-key span.

And she remembers Matt with his eyes that watched her even after she took to blindfolding him.

And she will remember this one.

He is heavy on her. More and more of his weight has become hers to bear as they progressed. First he supported himself on his knees, then only on his elbows, and at the last he collapsed on her, all the breath gone from his body. A dead weight.

Oh, Sam.

He is so still now that she begins to wonder if he *is* dead. She doesn't want to speak, there is a terrible pressure in the space between her suprasternal notch and her diaphragm, the Anahatha, the heart chakra, which is more than just the burden of his body. She pushes against his ribs with both hands. His sides are fleshy, it is the body of an elephant seal.

Get off.

Mia, what's the matter?

Get off, get off, get out.

He does not move at first, and she pushes harder. He rolls off and out of her, she is moving a tombstone.

He reaches for her, makes the mistake of grasping her neck, there is pain there where his hand is, and suddenly she is a nest of weasels in his arms, a burning bush, a salmon swimming upstream, nature, red in tooth and claw. He is Zeus grasping a prickly nymph and when at last he realises what he is doing he lets go.

She is on her feet immediately and calm, turning her whole body away because she can't break the gaze with her eyes alone. She starts getting dressed, her movements like a tai chi sequence, blinking away the vertigo.

You have to go.

Why?

I want you to.

I don't want to.

Fine. Then I'll go. Where are my pants?

You're wearing them.

Not my panties, my pants, my *pants*, Jesus... my *trousers*.

I want you to stay.

You got what you wanted. I'm going now.

It was a mistake to seek out his eyes, like looking directly into the sun, the damage is invisible but everlasting.

I want you.

What's the time?

God, Mia, the *time*? Who cares what the time is?

I want to know if the tubes are still open.

Where will you go?

Away.

She can't believe what she has done. Giving up on locating warmer clothes, she dons again what he took off her, finds her shoes, throws her stockings into her handbag.

I'm in love with you, Mia.

What does that mean? In your world? What does that even *mean*? You want to own me?

I was wrong about that. I didn't know. I was so wrong. Wait.

She cools her eyes on the gloating moon. It was a Hunter's moon, after all.

Goodbye, Victor.

Mia de Vos power-walking the opalescent mile to the tube station, careful not to break into a run with all that that would signify, as Rudolf Viktor Adamski II scrambles to get his clothes on and follow her, catch her.

Little Mia de Villiers, the Stellenbosch loose forward, one thing to all men, pedalling away from Wilgenhof *dat die stof so staan*. They are after her, they are after her, if they don't get her now they will get her tomorrow, or soon, she's doomed now, they know her name, her days are numbered, she is living on borrowed time.

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Mia sat on the shore with her knees pulled up to her chin. She had just pulled on a long-sleeved top against the evening breeze. Cassie and Sam were small pale flecks bobbing giddily in the distance. Cassie's arm pointing upwards, to the stars.

She thought, she was sure, Cassie was making a point, staying out there so long, keeping him out there so long, so that she would be alone here, watching them, and thinking. By now the water had to be too cold to be pleasant.

Mia thought about the point Cassie was making and wondered whether it mightn't be a good idea to take it.

The entire night sky belongs to her in his mind, she thought. Who can compete with that?

Why was she still trying?

Rising to her feet, she looked up into the trees ranked like monks above the dam, their branches raised, supplicating, towards the sky. It would be pleasant now, she thought, to creep into the dark spaces between them and run her hands over their skins. She found a route up the escarpment and onto the mountain path, where she lingered for a moment at the forest edge to look back over the lake. She could not see her friends, but she heard Cassie gasp and splash, very distant, and the echoes of Sam's laughter.

She leaned her shoulder against the nearest stone pine. Perhaps, before they left for London, she would say to Sam something like, Cassie's changed her mind. Cassie told me she wants to marry you. She's a great girl and she wants to marry you. Why don't you two crazy kids get hitched?

The cicadas had quieted when the sun went down, but the forest was full of its own noises, other creatures that were coming awake now, under ground, on the ground, under the bark of the trees. If you tell a lie that negates another lie, do you get zero? thought Mia. Does that give you a clean slate?

A rustling from behind startled her, something more solid and deliberate than the wind in the tree-tops. She turned.

There was silence, and then another crackle of dry leaves. Mia wondered if some nocturnal animal was foraging in there, and if so, whether she might be able to get a decent picture of it with the flash. She peered about between the trees.

She barely had time to see the dark mass crouched beside a log before it unfolded itself, expanding against the luminous forestscape like an ink stain, limbs flowering forth and propelling it forward, so swift and unexpected that it was only once her wrist was clenched in his fingers and his elbow was about her neck that she knew it to be a human being. Metal glinted in his right hand, and he said, kahki.

She screamed.

Sssh!

He began pulling her away back towards the forest, crushing her between his arms. She managed to scream again before the hand left her wrist and clamped itself across her mouth. It smelled of sap and pine-needles. Kahki, he said, give me the kahki. She sank her teeth into the flesh of his palm. With the hand that was free she reached back blindly to claw for his eyes, and her fingers touched wetness and warmth. Her attacker's arm flinched away, and she wrenched herself out of his grasp. Mia launched herself away from him with all her strength, and her head snapped back sharply. Instantly she began choking. He had grabbed hold of the camera slung around her neck, he was garrotting her with the camera strap. He twisted it in his hand so there was no give, and Mia felt herself losing consciousness as she was forced to totter backwards. The car key, he said. *Sleutel*.

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She arrived at the tube station at a walking pace, the sweat a chill film that clung to her heated skin. She limped towards the turnstile like an injured thing, having broken a heel off one silver Jimmy Choo in her headlong rush down Southcroft Road. Every passenger on the escalator up turned towards



her as she passed them on the escalator down, heads rolling like prayer beads to watch her descend into the earth.

*They can smell him on you.* The scarlet letter, the mark of the beast. Beneath the green dress, her thighs twitched. Her skin recoiled now at the lubricious touch of the fabric. She took the first tube north, with no notion of where she was going. He might be chasing her still; she had to stay on the move.

*This kind of predator doesn't chase. It waits.*

*You might have mentioned that before.*

In the tube car: young men. All young men, all strangers to each other, but they turned as one and looked at her. With pity, lust, revolt, she couldn't tell anymore.

Only that morning the world had still been full of good things. Or, at least, things she understood. Or, if she didn't understand them, she could handle them.

Only that morning, she had, at least, been faking it successfully: being a normal human being with only one shadow, where it belonged, at her feet.

She had seen Sebastian off from her house, opening the door for him sleepily and squinting against the bright clouds. They were about to take up arms against each other in a war for art's sake about which neither of them could care less.

'Break a leg,' said Mia.

*In bocca alla Lupa*, he grinned. He folded his hands behind his back, kissed her on the cheek with a luxuriant smacking sound, and bounced out into Southcroft Road, the unconscientious objector, as if all the world were a stage.

He had spent what remained of the night before on Mia's couch, where he had passed out cold almost as soon as he sat down. She had known it was bound to happen, when she invited him in for coffee. In fact, part of her had suspected that a lot more than that was bound to happen.

Sebastian on her couch, where his sister had sat for her portrait, although the couch was no longer in the kitchen. 'This is a dinky little camera,' he had said through a voluminous yawn, cycling through her photos without asking. The digital camera had been on the side-table.

'Thanks,' said Mia, cycling through the same photos in her mind to check if there was anything he shouldn't be seeing. She hadn't taken all that many. Helena, Helena's friends. Matt. A few of herself. 'Matt gave it to me.'

'Of course he did, bless him,' said Sebastian.

'I really don't see where you get off taking the piss like that.'

'I wasn't,' said Sebastian. 'I was being sincere.' He aimed the camera at Mia.

'Don't,' said Mia, who was in the middle of a yawn of her own. But he already had.

He looked at the capture and smiled. '...No, really,' he said, putting the camera aside and stretching out on the couch as if he had been born there and intended to die there. 'I may have been a bit overhasty in my wholesale dismissal of him.' He paused. 'I've been meaning to say that. He's a very decent sort.'

'He's not a sort at all. That's where you were wrong to begin with. He's Matt.'

'All right, all right.' He had one arm over his eyes now; and already his responses were preceded by a lag, a pause, as if this were an international call.

'So we have your blessing, is that what you're saying?'

Another lag. 'My blessing?' Sebastian mumbled. 'What do you want my blessing for? Are you getting married?'

'No,' she laughed. 'No.' She stood up. 'I'd better go get you that coffee. You're falling asleep.'

'Be that as it may,' said Sebastian, and never finished his sentence.

Instead of coffee, she fetched bedding. She stood for a moment with the blankets bundled in her arms, and studied him. He slept hot, like a child, and his eyelids had the sealed, translucent look of a young child asleep. *I will* paint him, she thought, as himself, if I can catch him like this. She wondered how she would fare at getting that across with on paper, the eyelids, that vulnerable sheen. She had half a mind to try now, as he lay, with pencil, but she was too tired, and there was not much light.

She threw the blanket over him, and thought it might be nice to brush his hair away from his forehead. But instead she took his picture with the digital camera. He did not stir despite the flash and the canned shutter-sound. She looked at the capture; the flash had rendered him ghoulish. The soul does not convert well to ones and zeros.

The shot before that, the one he had taken, showed her thunder-faced and bag-eyed, her mouth gaping. Seeing herself yawning in the picture, she yawned again.

She set an alarm for herself so she could get him up in three hours, then crawled into bed, where she fell asleep immediately and dreamed about a black door.

After she had seen him off the next morning, Mia tumbled back into bed beneath the pretzeled duvet. Her instinct was to go to the gallery and see what the damage to the mural was by the light of day, but she couldn't face the people she knew would be there: the artists, the events coordinators, the crewmen. Nothing more to be done about it anyway. She slept soundly until midday.

That evening she donned a long gown of mamba green, backless and sleeveless, with a mandarin neck, which she had bought for the occasion. In her mind she saw it clashing with purple, although of course she knew that Fillette would probably never wear *that* dress again, and certainly not tonight.

She did her eyes Cleopatra-style, and left the rest of her mantid-shaped face a monotone unaccentuated ivory. A few days earlier she had gone to a stylist recommended by Fillette, and flirted, as she had every time she was in a hairdresser's since 1994, with the idea of a blue-black Mia

Wallace bob, but chickened out as usual and went for layers, mahogany lowlights and streaks of fox-red.

Matt came to pick her up at six. He was writing his last and, he suspected, most difficult exam the next morning, and she had tried to persuade him that she would understand if he didn't come, but he insisted that he could spare an hour.

'Well, well,' she said when he arrived, tilting her head at him appraisingly. She had never seen him in a tux before.

'Well, well, well,' he said, gawking at her. It was not at all put on.

'Like it?'

'I don't think I've ever liked anything more in my life.'

There was still sun on the gallery when they arrived, and in the humid air the building's exoskeleton had an oily glisten to it. Mia's stomach was jumping as they climbed the stairs. It felt different, going up the stairs in high heels and formal wear, amongst other people in high heels and formal wear, with this velvet rope before her, this photographer, this champagne being drunk outside the entrance, these canapés being eaten, this bald man with dark glasses and an earpiece at the great glass door. It was someone else's place now, and would never be hers again.

'Mia de Vos and partner,' she said to the woman with the red mouth and the curtain of sin-coloured hair who stood next to the bald man. The events coordinator stretched her lips into what was presumably intended to be a smile. 'A very pleasant evening to you, Miss de Vos,' she said knowingly, and ticked the guest list. The doorman lifted the rope.

They both declined champagne.

Inside, Mia's eyes went first to her mural. A man with a press card was actively looking at it; the rest of those in the foyer were too busy looking at each other. A woman with a press card was trying to get the attention of the curator, who was ignoring her.

'Incredible,' said Matt, joining her before it. 'You're incredible. You can actually *feel* those needles scratching your skin.'

'Yes...' said Mia absently, walking up to it and peering closely. She reached out to touch the ghosts of the letters that had been there the night before. It was rather like a watermark. Really, one wouldn't notice if one didn't know where to look, she thought, at the same time battenning down a new wave of anger against Jamie Lamington for so very nearly ruining it, and against herself for having created the circumstances in which it was possible for him to have done so.

'Please, Miss, don't touch the art,' said a voice behind her. She turned to see a second bald man with an earpiece looming over her sternly.

'Sorry,' said Mia, stepping away.

Matt was scanning the corners of the mural. He frowned, and Mia waited for him to say something about the marks. But all he said was, 'you didn't sign it.'

'No,' said Mia.

They went through into Room One, and Mia gasped at the difference in the space. She had heard a little about the featured work from Victor, but had somehow failed to quite picture it *in* the gallery. Some part of her thought the interior had been more beautiful as she had known it; bare, and full of light. But Victor, or his advisors, had chosen shrewdly. Up on the walls: a series of bold monochrome canvases in metallic colours by Samuel Cane; on the floor: Nadia Petrovsky's skeletal sculptures. The pelvis was on a pedestal. Victor Adamus was on the skywalk.

'Shall we go up?' said Mia, waving to him. There was no sign of Fillette.

'There're rather a lot of people on it already,' said Matt.

'Oh, for goodness' sake, not *that* again,' said Mia, pulling him back through the doorway towards the stairs.

Victor greeted her soberly, and introduced her to a ferrety man in his thirties who turned out to be Samuel Cane.

'Yours?' he said, pointing towards her trees.

'Yes.'

'Smashing. Always refreshing to see someone bold enough to do naturalism these days.' He downed a glass of champagne and took another from the waiter. 'What kind of trees are they? Your patron and I have been debating it.'

'Oh,' said Mia. 'They're stone pines.'

'Stone pines,' said Samuel Cane to Victor. He popped a canapé in his mouth. 'Is that a South African tree?'

'It's an alien,' said Mia. 'But it grows there, yes.' Mia turned to Victor. 'Where's Fillette tonight?' she said.

'She had something else on,' said Victor.

'Something else?' said Mia, incredulous. What occasion could conceivably be more attractive to Fillette than the opportunity to be seen on Victor's arm, surrounded by glitterati and press? The answer arrived from Victor's lips just as it arrived in Mia's head.

'Some sort of a garden party,' he said, looking mystified.

She had completely forgotten. It was the full moon. So Fillette had somehow cracked the nod at last, she thought, wondering if Fillette and Victor might have quarrelled over this decision. She could not imagine Victor needing anything from anyone enough to quarrel over it.

Matt was once again gone from her side. Surely he wasn't really going to repeat that nonsense about avoiding the skywalk? But he was there after all, at the other end, speaking, or listening to, a striking blonde woman who was gesturing down towards the pelvis.

'Is that –'

'Miss Petrovsky,' said Victor.

Mia had been sure she would need to look after Matt, and had been anticipating feeling exasperated to have him about, when she was trying to network with arty people while simultaneously managing her stress about the goings-on over in Whitechapel.

She was therefore somewhat nonplussed to see Matt acquitting himself well with someone whose attention she herself had hoped to engage. She felt a little unnerved, not because he was talking to another woman, but because Matt being shy was a touchstone to her, and she had been surprised too much of late. She remembered him conversing with the female skyscrapers at Fillette's dinner party, and wondered for the first time whether it might have completely escaped her attention that her boyfriend was rather good with women. He was not like Sebastian who made them clutch at their skirts and giggle, with whom they couldn't trust themselves and didn't particularly want to, but, what was it Cassie had said? He was safe.

She could see Nadia Petrovsky leaning unconsciously into the haven of his aura, mimicking the lines of his body. Both had one hand on the railing and heads bowed over. Matt was nodding.

The woman with a press card whom Mia had seen in the foyer was tapping Nadia Petrovsky on the shoulder, and gesturing towards a photographer by her side. A moment later the second bald security guard, whom Mia had privately dubbed Bullet Tooth Tony, tapped her in turn. No flash photography, she heard him say. You can take pictures outside, or wait for the publicity shots.

Mia went to the other end of the skywalk, and looked down into Room Two. It was sparsely furnished, and the work appeared to be by various artists. She saw what could only be a Rothko against the wall facing the skywalk, downstairs. There was nothing above the mezzanine.

'Where's...' she tried to remember the third artist's name. 'Patricia Whitehead's work?' She had directed the comment to Victor, but his back was turned – he was talking to his bodyguard – and it was Samuel Cane who answered.

'Pulled out,' he said. 'Yesterday.' He smiled at her.

'Yesterday?' said Mia. All the contributing artists, Mia included, were under contract.

'Never underestimate the power of a guilty conscience,' said Samuel Cane. She met his eye for rather longer than was customary between people who had just met, he smiling, she simply looking, and wondering.

'You know,' he said, looking towards the stone pines, 'I was going to get that commission, for about five minutes.'

'You were?'

'So I was told. In so many words. Nothing signed, of course. Then he found you.'

'Oh...'

'No, don't worry. I'm delighted for you. Chances like this don't come along twice. It would have begun and ended there for me. But you...' he looked now at Victor's back. 'You're something else again. Any fool can see it's destined to be a, ah, long-term arrangement.'

Under his wing for life. Forty-five degrees in the shade.

He motioned her a little closer, smiling as he watched her face. 'You're being smart,' he said. 'It's the ones who didn't come who are the sheep. Flocking around a principle for reasons everyone will have forgotten in a month's time. Principles don't pay the rent. You have to follow the money.'

'Is that what you're doing, then?' said Mia.

'Of course.'

Samuel Cane took another glass of champagne; raised it in a silent toast to her, nodding once again towards her trees. Then he turned for the stairs, leaving Mia feeling unnerved and out of her depth. She wanted to call him back, explain that she had not known, that she did not wish him to be delighted for her, that she had no part in this. She started when she heard Victor's voice right behind her. 'You must talk to the press,' he said.

Mia turned. 'Oh, no,' she said.

'Of course you must.' He motioned with his head towards a portly man with a canny look who had accosted the curator. 'That's *Time Out*. He'll come here next, so stay next to me.'

But just then a second man, this one thin, but also with a canny look, asked Victor in a ripe Cockney accent if he could have a moment.

'Certainly,' said Victor. 'You are?'

'Stephen Cruickshanks, *The Guardian*. And who is your lovely partner?'

'This is Mia de... Vos,' said Victor, not correcting him on the lovely partner bit, perhaps because he was distracted by having to correct himself on the name. The reporter smiled and nodded. He did not write the name down.

'How do you feel about the turnout tonight, Mr. Adamus?' said the reporter.

'We are thrilled to have some artists of great esteem present, and others of great promise.' He looked at Mia and reached a hand towards her back; opened his mouth to, presumably, say something about her. A bright bolt of heightened awareness shot through Mia's body from the spot where his hand hovered above her skin – noticing that her back was bare, he had not quite touched her.

'It would seem that others of esteem and promise are conspicuous by their absence,' said the reporter.

Victor frowned. Mia admired Stephen Cruickshanks for not withering beneath his gaze like an ant beneath a magnifying glass. 'I'm not sure I heard a question in there,' he said.

'It has been rumoured that tonight's event has turned into something of a face-off.'

Victor's face became very still.

'That several of the forerunners of the contemporary art scene have declined to attend,' the reported continued. 'Do you have any comment on the choice phrases of a certain thespian luminary in his letter to *The Guardian* this week?'

'I have not come across any choice phrases in that publication of late.'

'I just so happen to have Professor Chandler's comments written down here,' said the journalist, unfazed. Flipping back a couple of pages in his notepad, he read: 'Make no mistake, Rudolph Victor Adamus is a man of vision. But history has given us good reason to be wary of men of vision, particularly those who come bearing gifts. In The East End's Adamus Gallery we find a typically heavy-handed attempt at a peace offering. Let us hope it does not turn out to be another Trojan Horse.'

The journalist folded the notepad shut and looked up, smiling pleasantly.

'What did you say your name was?' said Victor Adamus. He was looking over the journalist's shoulder, at Bullet Tooth Tony, as he said it. Bullet Tooth Tony caught his glance and raised his eyebrows.

'Stephen Cruikshanks.'

Victor returned his gaze to the reporter's face. 'Well, Mr. –'

'Yooooohoo! Victor Darling!' a voice echoed from below. Mia looked down. It was Lady Maddox, with what was presumably Sir Maddox by her side. He looked nothing at all like his children from above.

'Excuse me,' said Victor to the reporter, and headed for the stairwell.

The reporter nodded dismissively at Mia and attempted to follow him, but found his way blocked accidentally-on-purpose by Bullet Tooth Tony.

Mia stood abandoned on the skywalk, her palms sweating against the railing. Dane's cadre had, after all, been making waves, or trying to. What if the rally didn't stay at the theatre?

She crossed the length of the skywalk through the second-floor door, and walked around the mezzanine towards Room Three.

Her old workspace had been furnished with more of Samuel Cane's vicious canvases, which, she saw now, were not canvases at all. He had used sheets of metal of varying thicknesses, and stained, marred or coated them with a range of substances. *Hydrochloric Acid on Silver* she read. *Urine on Copper*. Each applied – stencilled, she assumed – in such a way that the suggestion of a face emerged. The collection was entitled *Mine*.

The Perspex-covered plaque beside his name provided an elaborate explanation. Mia got lost by the second sentence. She did not wish to make the connections set out for her here, grasp the insights that might confirm for her that he had a point to make.

It was not as immediately gripping as Nadia Petrovsky's work. But then Samuel Cane had not had a war's worth of suffering to draw on, she thought, her mind halting again at Sebastian.

She left Room Three and wandered around the mezzanine, stopping by the drinks table at the top of the stairwell. She fingered one of the half-empty champagne flutes. There was pale brown lipstick on the rim.

She wasn't sure what she thought they might do. Show up with pitchforks and torches; turn the peace offering into a burnt offering. Or just show up. Expose her for a turncoat, an informer. A lizard mole.

'What's wrong?' said Matt from behind her.

Mia turned, her eyes starting like grasshoppers. 'What?'

'You look like you're waiting for a bomb to go off,' said Matt.

'Don't say things like that.' Mia recommenced fiddling fitfully with a champagne bottle top, looking out over the foyer. 'What time is it?' she said.

'Eightish. I can stay another half hour or so,' said Matt.

'Good,' said Mia, though that was not what she meant. The play would surely only start about now.

The skywalk swayed a little and someone behind Mia said 'Woo!' Matt took hold of a cable with a gentle – a gentling – hand, as if to steady the structure rather than himself. He put the other on her back, where Victor hadn't.

'I love the way that from up here you feel like Robin Hood, looking down from the treetops,' he said. 'Did you often stand here to see what it would look like?'

"Robin" was all she heard. She could, conceivably, phone Sebastian and ask him what was going on, just to set her mind at ease. Perhaps his cell phone would interrupt one of Dane's deciduous speeches.

A flickering movement in the corner caught her eye. She looked at the single upstairs CCTV screen, installed as an extra precaution once the art had arrived.

'Mia?'

'What, Matt?'

His face closed. 'Never mind.'

She couldn't be bothered to apologise for her shortness with him; and knew he would make all the necessary excuses for her inside his own head.

There was someone at the security door, although the front entrance was open. Big hulking fellow. Bald patch. 'I have to go for a minute,' she said to Matt.

'All right.'

She had left the champagne cap on the lip of the railings, and Matt picked it up in her wake. He saw how she had folded the wire and the bottle top into a little animal, with the lid forming its domed back, and thought how remarkable it was to see those faculties native to us thrusting through unbidden; how everything she touched turned to art. She would mould things; she would imbue her environment with meaning beyond its lot, the way his brother Robert could never look at a machine



without taking it apart to see how it worked; the way his father couldn't look at something broken without fixing it, or trying to.

He played with the idea for a minute, looking at the fetish Mia had made and fancying it as a talent made manifest, conceiving talents as things with blindly pawing little wills of their own, directing our growth from birth, and ever after taking possession of our limbs and digits in our absent moments.

He thought she would like this idea of his, that it would appeal to her – he could hear her sidwinding intonation of the 'Mmm' sound she would make in response – and he pocketed the little animal so that he would find it later and be reminded.

The CLACK CLACK of her heels sounded below him, and he looked towards the foyer. She was stalking past the trees to the security door with her arms folded across her diminutive breasts, the sprays of glacial light phosphorescing on the green dress. She was diamonds and emeralds, she was crystal and kryptonite, she drew the eye, she defied the hand, he would never forget the way she looked now. She belongs in this place, thought Matt, an artwork herself finer and more inviolable than anything on the walls or between the forbidding braided ropes. Then he thought: She belongs to this place.

He realised that he would never in all likelihood mention his idea to her after all, and wondered if it could really be true that she was lost to him already.

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Mia had half a mind not to open the door, and that would doubtless have been wiser. But she was in a temper; her worries over the entire evening had become incarnated in the person and undesirable proximity of Joe, and she would have satisfaction. She opened the security door.

He grinned to see her, our man on the inside. 'Well! You clean up good.'

Mia wished she could say the same for him. 'Art lover, are you?' she said.

He laughed.

'What are you doing here? Aren't you supposed to be securing the theatre?'

'Eh?'

'The theatre. Dane said you were doing their security.'

'Security? No.' He tried to brush past her, but she stood in his way.

Joe looked down at her confused, then comprehension dawned that she was, touchingly, trying to prevent him from entering. 'Now then, stand aside, love,' he said.

'It's invitation only,' said Mia sternly.

Another realisation ushered the last one aside to take custody of his features. 'You're one of them?' said Joe. 'I thought you were one of us.'

'I'm one of nobody. I just painted a flipping mural. Which one of you very nearly destroyed. Now what is it that you want?'

'I just want to 'av a look.'

'And report back, is that the idea? Are you spying?' If so, he was the most conspicuous spy Mia had seen in her life. He was dressed in a tuxedo that looked like it might have been reconstituted from the wardrobe of The Supremes, with a clip-on bowtie clinging on for dear life around his neck.

'I'm a prima fucking ballerina, all right?' He pushed her against the wall.

The bouncer at the front entrance was leaning back into the room to watch them, and he raised his eyebrows at her inquiringly. She smiled confidently and shook her head to say it's fine, I know him, he's kosher, me and Joe, we go way back, we're like *this*. The bouncer let his eye leave slowly, as Joe lumbered into the room and looked, with some surprise, at Mia's miraculously unblemished mural. She saw the bouncer speaking into his sleeve. Up on the skywalk, Bullet Tooth Tony turned around, his head following Joe's progress across the foyer.

'Mia?'

She turned sharply. Matt.

'I have to get going now,' he said.

'Oh. Okay then.'

'Again, it's magnificent,' he said, inclining his head towards the mural, his eyes not leaving her face. 'Congratulations.'

'Thanks,' she smiled. 'And thanks for coming.'

He paused. 'Well, I'll see you tomorrow then?'

'Yep.' He was still waiting for something.

'Wish me luck,' he said at last, over-jovially.

'Oh, gosh, Matt, yes, sorry. I won't see you before then, will I? *In bocca alla lupa*.'

'What?'

'Good luck.'

'Right.' He nodded twice and smiled.

Very suddenly she loved him absolutely. It happened to her these days. There was no constancy in the flow of her affection for him, but once in a while, somehow, the same genus of gestures and comments that at other times irritated her would suddenly provoke a desire to protect him from himself, from her, from the sneering world. And then it would suddenly rear in her like a lance thrust, this love, in the face of the sheer hopeless decency of him, and she would recognise its impurity, its complicitness with guilt and something like compassion, and be sad for it.

She hugged him, and he drew a hope from the fervour of that embrace that was almost worse than the self-imposed fantasy of hopelessness he had walked himself through ten minutes before.

He left the gallery, and watching after him, Mia saw him brush past Sebastian at the velvet rope. They exchanged nothing more than a nod. I should have walked him out, Mia thought.

The red-mouthed woman at the front was running a talon down the guest list. Sebastian was frowning.

'Look,' she heard him say as she went towards him. 'That's my mother in there.' He pointed towards Room One.

Mia touched the event coordinator's arm. 'He's okay,' she said.

The events coordinator looked confused, and Sebastian amused. 'You see,' he said to the events coordinator. 'I'm O.K, you're O.K, everything's going to be all right. Can I come in now?'

The events coordinator smiled at him, glaring, and motioned to the doorman to lift the rope. They entered the foyer. Sebastian took a handful of crushed ice from a champagne bucket and dropped it down the seat of Mia's dress. She hissed and cuffed him, grabbing at her bottom for ice shards.

'He's okay,' Sebastian scoffed. 'Quite the little right-hand-man, aren't you?'

'I prefer 'freelance protégé'' said Mia grimly.

'If only I'd known, I would have dropped your name instead of the old bat's.'

'What are you doing here, anyway?'

'I came to rub shoulders with the rich and shameless, of course.'

'Are you really done over there?' She looked at him properly for the first time, and saw that his hair was different; slicked back, furrowed and ducktailed. Then she noticed the rest: he was wearing spats, a blazer, trousers with suspenders over a stiff-collared white shirt. He looked completely exhausted and as attractive as she'd ever seen him. 'You're missing the comb in your sock,' she added.

'It's my last wardrobe change from tonight,' he said. 'I thought if I wasted time getting changed I might miss it completely, so I just took the makeup off and left. Besides, it's the closest thing to a penguin suit I have access to.' He lit a cigarette, taking out and opening the cigarette box, propping one in the corner of his mouth and Zippoing it, all with one hand – gratuitously, as the other was doing nothing better than idling in his pocket. She didn't tell him it was no-smoking inside.

'Is it all over?'

'All over.' He was bent over the mural, scrutinising it in the same way she had, like a physician checking for lingering remnants of a rash. He touched the shadows of the graffiti, and she had no urge to prevent him. 'Palimpsest,' he murmured.

'Eh?'

'Nothing. Anyone say anything?'

'No, but I don't suppose they would have even if they did notice,' said Mia.

'But it looks all right, doesn't it?'

'All things considered. How did your end go?' As if they were department heads working towards a common deadline.

'As well as can be expected.'

'What does that mean?'

'As I said, it's a crap play. But it did what Dane wanted it to do.'

'Did the masses get riled up?'

'In a gentle fashion. Couldn't have gone better, actually, from that perspective. And Jamie Lamington, you will be thrilled to learn, performed with a most charming speech impediment. Sounded more like an orphan than ever with that blocked nose.'

'Did the authorities give you any trouble?'

'Alas, no. Joe's bussed-in herds didn't do anything much more incendiary than send a petition round.' He looked over his shoulder at the sound of laughter from Room One. 'Speaking of bussed-in herds, did anyone –' But he had reminded Mia of the potential calamity at hand.

'Speaking of Joe, actually,' she interrupted him. 'I need you to do something. He's here.'

'Oh, he came, did he. He said he might. How did he get past Cerberus over there?'

'I let him in.'

'That was clever of you. Good Lord, is that Derek Jacobi?'

'I need you to get rid of him.'

'What for? He's just a loveable old knight.'

'Sebastiunnnh.'

He sighed. 'What's he doing?'

'Nothing, yet. But he will, I can smell it. And the security, they smell it too. Please, just get him to leave.'

Sebastian knew he could not protest twice, after last night, that Mia was needlessly concerned. 'I'll try,' he said.

Their heads were still bowed together before the mural, so that they would have appeared to an onlooker as if they were listening to it instead of looking at it, and that the tree trunk closest to their ears had just said something worrisome. This was exactly how they appeared to the onlooker who was looking on at that moment.

'Sebastian, what are you doing here?' It was Fillette's voice.

Mia looked round with surprise, and saw not Fillette, but Lady Maddox. They sounded identical when incensed.

'*Semper in excretum sum*,' said Sebastian under his breath.

'You're not wanted here, you know that,' said his mother, drifting across the foyer. Mia had not imagined she could lose her temper any more than an orchid could.

'Good evening to you too, Mamma,' said Sebastian.

She wafted away his smoke. 'You and your friends have caused us enough worry tonight. Have you no shame?'

'I came to see Mia's painting, that's all,' said Sebastian, although he was walking away from it as he spoke, towards Room One.

'Don't you dare attempt an injured tone with me,' said his mother, following him. 'It was your choice to mix yourself up in this *nonsense*. You can't simply unmix yourself when it suits you. Now do the civilised thing and leave.'

'We will, shortly.' He had spotted Joe on the mezzanine. Joe had spotted Victor Adamus, who was talking to the curator on the skywalk. Bullet Tooth Tony had also spotted Joe, and now all three began converging.

'Sebastian!' Lady Maddox called after him as he left the foyer. 'Your father -'

'Is very disappointed. I know,' said Sebastian.

Mia smiled apologetically at Lady Maddox. 'He won't be long,' she said, and hurried after him.

Joe had made it onto the skywalk first, and he was attempting to engage Victor's attention when Sebastian arrived behind him. Victor frowned at him curiously around Joe's shoulder. Joe turned to see what he was looking at, and saw Sebastian.

'Oh, it's you,' said Joe incuriously.

'Do either of you know this... person?' said Victor. Joe turned round to see who he was addressing.

'No!' said Mia from behind Sebastian, where she was obliged to stand due to the narrowness of the skywalk and the number of people already strung out along its length. Joe eyed her sharkishly.

'Go on, Sebastian. Tell him who I am,' he said.

Mia looked at Sebastian. Sebastian was no longer interested in the proceedings on the skywalk. He was looking down into Room Two, and had gone pale.

Mia looked down into Room Two, and saw Sebastian's father looking up at him, his lips very thin and his eyes widening with something closer to horror than ire.

She learned two things at once: that Sebastian had had no idea his father was going to be there, and that his mother had been trying to warn him.

'What are you after, fellow?' said Victor to Joe.

'I know who he is,' said Stephen Cruickshanks. 'You're Joe Barker, aren't you. The unionist.'

Victor frowned, which, as Mia had noticed before, had the odd effect of making his eyes wider instead of narrower. 'Are you the one who's been sending me those letters?' he said.

'Letters? No idea what you're on about,' said Joe. 'But since you mention -' he reached into his jacket, and Bullet Tooth Tony dive-tackled him.

There were ten people on the skywalk already, and the additional force of impact created by Bullet Tooth Tony was too much for the structure. A great groaning of metal echoed through Room One, and then a cable snapped, and another, and the skywalk began tipping.

The passengers began to slide as if on the deck of a sinking ship. Mia saw Victor grabbing the railings. She saw Sebastian leaping for the mezzanine. She saw the curator tumbling backwards into a waiter. She saw glasses falling, champagne spilling, cold chive hollandaise and caramelised onion tartlets, salmon nigiri, pork satay mini-kebabs and mi-cuit tomato bruschetta drizzled with basil pesto

raining down onto the sculptures and the grizzled pate of the Rt. Hon. Oswald Maddox, Bt. She was so busy watching everyone else, she was so busy thinking, *now, now it's going to happen, now it's happening*, that she barely noticed when she herself suddenly fell through the nadir of the V in the railings, and became airborne.

She turned in the air, like a cat. Joe Barker broke her fall.

Nadia Petrovsky's pelvis had broken his.

When Mia's head stopped spinning, she found Joe lying unconscious next to her. In the hand that lay limp at his side was a sheaf of paper lined with rows of indignant signatures, and a letter.

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On the way to Tooting in the Bentley, part of Mia thought that between she and Joe Barker, who had left the gallery in an ambulance, it was Joe who must be having the easier journey.

Victor Adamus did not speak. Mia did not speak either. Her heart was hammering inside her, and. Her skin was crawling, but it was not, or she did not think it was, from shock. It was from being alone with him; there beside the furnace of his wrath.

The paramedics had given her a brief examination, and pronounced her fit to travel. She had received nothing worse than a bruised elbow and an impact to the right ribcage.

Sebastian had been dragged home by his parents; not quite by the ear, but it was near thing. He had hardly spared a glance as they abandoned each other to their respective fates.

As the five of them stood passing a few last words, Sebastian and his parents facing Mia and Victor, it was already clear who would be leaving with whom.

Victor and Sir Maddox had directed the management of the crisis, their faces equally stony, though for different reasons. Lady Maddox, her poise swiftly reassembled, was preparing herself to protect father and son from one another. Sebastian had loitered, sullen as schoolboy, until they were ready to depart. Mia could see that he was terrified of his father, and that he was furious with himself for being terrified of his father, especially in Mia's sight. He had bid her a cursory farewell, failing to notice that she was terrified, too.

'I'll drive you home,' Victor had said, in a way that brooked no opposition.

Alone together in the car, the stoniness had fallen from him, and given way to this brooding volcano.

He still wore almost no expression – if anything he looked more sad than angry, but she was fearful, not for herself, exactly, but nevertheless, fearful of him. It was as if he was sorry for those he would soon avenge himself on. She could sense the great muscles of his will flexing and unflexing, the

plans being laid. Then she felt it settling, sprung, the whole coiled trap; saw him closet it away in those catacombs of his mind dedicated to these purposes, and he turned to her clear-browed and hot-eyed.

'Miss De Vos,' he said. 'If I'm not mistaken, I am in debt.'

'In... debt?'

'We have some paperwork to do.'

As she had only finished the mural the night before, there had not been a moment yet to settle up. 'I'd forgotten,' said Mia. 'It doesn't matter. Another time, we can do it any time.'

'And I have been remiss in thanks, and congratulations. There was a very good response to your work.'

'Was there?'

'There was.' She believed him. 'What's next for you?'

She paused, unsure of herself. How could anyone divide themselves so utterly? 'Back to the studio, I guess,' she said carefully. 'I mean Fillette's, not mine.' Nor any of yours, she thought.

'You are joking, I'm sure.'

'Joking? Why?'

'You should put trivialities like that thoroughly out of your mind. This is your hour. Strike now, while the striking's good. You can't afford to let so much as a week elapse.'

'A week? What can I produce in a week?'

'Not work, Mia, publicity. This is the moment to start promoting yourself. It's as much about the personality as the work, these days. Perhaps more. You need to put your face and your name about. I'll help, of course.'

'I think everyone's face will be put about quite enough for one week,' said Mia. In the chaos that ensued after the skywalk fell, there was not a single photographer present who had heeded the 'no flash photography' rule.

'I'm not sure how much point there would be, anyway,' said Mia. 'I'm going to have to leave in December.'

'Leave?' said Victor. And now, at last, for the space of this one word, he sounded angry.

'My visa is expiring.'

Victor Adamus laughed. It was only the second time she had heard him do so in the length of their acquaintance. 'That will not prove to be a problem,' he said.

'Ah...' said Mia. 'You just ran a red light.'

'I know,' said Victor.

After what seemed like an interminable journey – despite the speed at which Victor drove – they reached Southcroft Road. Mia directed him to the correct house, and the Bentley purred to a halt. Victor turned the engine off.

'Well,' said Mia. 'Thank you for the ride.' Her hand was already on the doorhandle. 'I'm... I'm very sorry, Victor, about the opening.' She was scared to say this much. It sounded too much like an admission of guilt. He would crush her, if he knew. Maul her, devour her.

'You'll be all right, by yourself?' was his answer.

'Yes.' Then something made her say, 'Will you?'

He turned his shaggy head towards her, but kept his eyes lowered, as if in shame. He did not speak.

'You could come in,' she said. 'For a drink.'

Inside, Victor looked at everything around him, her little world, her ordinary things, with interest and something like confusion. 'Is there any other work of yours that you would permit me to see?' he asked. His voice in this place. It sent her nerves singing. She poured him a glass of wine from the last decent bottle Helena had left. He did not drink it.

'I haven't done much, to be honest,' said Mia. 'I've been running around like a headless chicken pretty much since I arrived.' There was the painting of Fillette, which he already owned. Then the painting of Matt, which she had given to Matt for Christmas. She was quite proud of that, but it wasn't much as a standalone. She had wanted to do a triptych, of Matt walking away at progressive distances, like screen stills from a movie, with the completed piece forming the middle part, but she was bored before she even began by the thought of painting the same background three times.

'What about work you did in South Africa?' said Victor.

'My portfolio? I had to leave it behind. There was no way I could transport it.'

'But how did you imagine you would get started without any work to show?'

'Well of course I brought *pictures* of it, on CD,' said Mia.

'Of course,' said Victor. 'How different the world is now,' he said, sadly, and there was such a distance in his voice that Mia had the sense that he was speaking of a time not years, but centuries, millennia, past.

'I can show you those if you like.'

'I would like that.'

'Please, just... excuse the mess.'

They were going upstairs. She, Mia, was taking Victor Adamus upstairs to her bedroom. Even Sebastian had not made it this far.

Helena's old PC was still in the room that had become her studio. She opened her door and went in ahead of him.

'Good God,' said Victor from behind her. She turned. It wasn't *that* messy in here, surely. 'Good God, Mia,' said Victor again. "'Haven't done much?'" Were you pulling my leg? Where on earth did you find the time for this?'



Then she saw what he was looking – staring – at. The room was ringed on all sides by tarot paintings, twenty-two of them, each three foot by two, the entire Major Arcana.

'I don't know,' said Mia. She had done it instead of sleeping.

When she had completed the last card, The World, she had celebrated by arranging the canvas panels in a ring, facing outwards, all along the edge of the room.

Unlike the studies, they were unnamed. She couldn't bear to sully them, and thought she would add the names in post-production when she turned them into an actual deck. Then she realised there was no reason even to do that, as the deck would be for herself alone, and she knew which card was which, as would anyone who had the faintest inkling of tarot. She had spent a lot of money on oil paints, brushes and other supplies. The sable brushes Matt had given her for Christmas had been frizzled down to rattails.

Mia had felt for her own meaning in the cards. Gradually she had abandoned her notion of making them iconic, at first involuntarily, the way a limp will draw one into an unconscious circle, then resignedly, and so by the last card she had reverted to her own natural hyper-realism.

Thus, as one progressed, the 'story' which began with the stylised Fool, became more realistic. So gradually that you could not be sure whether it was simply because you were being drawn into their world, made a part of it, like Alice becoming backwards in the Looking Glass World, the paintings took on degrees of detail and dimension, until they were more than real, and dark in character, leaving one feeling tainted and unsteady.

Victor Adamus walked around the room slowly, in silence, while Mia stood in its centre.

At some he paused – Justice, the Wheel of Fortune, The Hanged Man, Death – and looked back at her with a mistrustful expression on his face, concerned and mistrustful, like a father when his teenage daughter tells him her first soft lie about where she's been that night. He came to a full halt at The Moon card, which had a lake beneath it with the moon's reflection doubled and flattened there.

'What's the matter?' said Mia, when his silence had become unbearable.

'They are remarkable,' said Victor. His circuit had taken him to the Emperor card, and here he stopped, and leaned down, and studied the bear muscular torso and the crowned head closely. 'Is this who I think it is?' he said after a while.

'I don't know,' said Mia. 'It depends on whether you think it's Rutger Hauer.'

'Oh,' said Victor, straightening. 'Who is he?'

'An actor. He was in *Blade Runner*'

'I have not seen *Blade Runner*.'

He remained before the painting for some time, then continued to the next, The Tower, where he stopped again, and opened his mouth, then thought better of it, and closed it again. Mia, perceiving that he might yet be a while, sat down on her bed. She winced as the injury to her ribs made its presence known. She wished she could go and peel off the green dress and look at it, nurse it. Lie

down with an ice-pack and go to sleep. She wished she had never invited Victor inside. It was too late, now.

Victor was bending over *The World*. He shook his head, stood erect and joined her by the bed, turning round in a circle to look at all of the paintings and be looked at by them. 'How on Earth did you manage to sleep in this room?' he said.

'I didn't,' said Mia. 'It's my studio, now.'

He nodded. 'Well, we must do something with these.'

'It was just for me,' said Mia. 'I did it for myself. I didn't intend them to be seen. I was going to make a deck with them.'

'A deck?' said Victor.

'A tarot deck,' said Mia, and registered the surprise on his face when she said, 'These are tarot cards.' She had thought that would have been obvious even to the uninitiated.

'I didn't realise,' said Victor. He sucked his upper lip intensely for thirty seconds, and said again, 'We must do something with them. If you can develop the theme, perhaps devise some central binding element to pull it all together, it's enough in itself for an exhibition.'

'Really?' He means Room Three, she thought, with mixed feelings.

'You could, I don't know, do another series like this, making fine art interpretations of some similar ideas from pop spirituality, like astrology signs, or the... the what's it called? The I-Ching -'

'Pop spirituality?' said Mia.

'Pop occultism, to be more specific. Arcana.'

'The tarot has been around for centuries and centuries,' said Mia. 'So has astrology, and the I-Ching, for that matter. There's nothing 'pop' about it.'

'Is it not popular? That's the whole point, it's the degradation of our symbolic heritage; its enslavement to trend. These things - ' he directed an oratorical hand towards the paintings '...used to mean something. Now they're... soul-candy.'

Suddenly he was telling her what the 'whole point' of her own work was, who hadn't even *known* they were tarot cards. 'Only to fluff bunnies,' she sniffed.

'Fluff... bunnies? What are those?'

'Sunday Wiccans.'

'Wiccans?' He said it to rhyme with Dickens. Which, she was forced to admit, it did.

'You don't know what Wicca is?' What *did* he and Fillette talk about?

'No.' he was beginning to look irritated; he hated being found wanting of information, not because it damaged his image, but because knowledge was like oxygen to him, and she was being stingy with it.

'Wicca is The Way of the Wise. The Craft. Witchcraft.'

'Huh,' he said, folding all he had just heard together. He rubbed his eyes with both hands, and when he opened them again it was as if the coals in them had been stoked. He laid them on her like a brand with his head tilted back, and said carefully, with sensitivity and masked discomfiture, rather

than accusation, as if asking his teenage daughter if she and her best friend Sarah always kissed each other goodbye in quite such a prolonged and enthusiastic manner, 'Mia... are you telling me that you are a witch?'

'No,' she said. 'No, I'm not, not at all. Not me. Yoga is about as 'occult' as I've ever gotten.'

He drew air in, slowly, through hard lips, windsucking, and then blew it out again with billowing cheeks. 'Well. I must say, that is something of a relief.' He circled the room another time, then walked over to her desk, which was covered in paper, and looked down at her Bristol board. 'And is this what you're working on right now? It's very striking. Is it a dragon?'

'No, it's... oh, never mind.' She had started out trying to paint Bottom, succeeded in drawing a goat, which had since, apparently, transmuted itself a dragon. I give up, she thought.

'I thought it might be modelled on Blake's *Red Dragon*,' said Victor. 'Is it also going to be a tarot card?'

'No,' said Mia. 'I'm not really working on it, as such.' The charcoal drawing he was looking at had not been intended as an artwork, or even a study for an artwork; it had been just a paroxysmal ejective urge, a way of taking what was on the inside and putting it on the outside, as Melanie might have said. She hesitated, and then thought, there's no harm in it. Everyone has dreams. 'It's a recurring dream I've been having.'

Bottom had started invading her nights sometime in June. It was always the same: she saw him limping, falling, crawling towards her, and always she woke just before he had quite reached her.

'It must be a very frightening dream,' said Victor, looking not at the beast anymore, but over his shoulder, at the tarot paintings, as if they might have moved.

'No,' said Mia thoughtfully. 'Not frightening, really. Not anymore. But I do wish I knew what it meant.'

His gaze had settled on the Devil card, but he turned now and let them rest on the charcoal sketch again. 'You know, it's the emblem of this city,' said Victor. 'The totem, one might have called it in another age. The dragon.'

'Yes,' said Mia. 'I've seen the plaques.'

'From my office I can see the statue at the Temple Bar, do you know it?'

'I do.'

'When I was growing up, my father used to tell me that in order to know what makes this city tick, you have to understand that the soul of London is a dragon's soul.' He paused. 'He said that to master it you need to learn to think like a dragon.'

'What does that mean?' said Mia uncomfortably.

Victor smiled. 'I'm still trying to work it out. I think I understand the essence of it though, if you used his own mind as a case in point. It has something to do with native cunning, with developing cunning until it's a reflex, that stops short at the spine and goes straight back to the muscles again. Reptilian cunning. And reptilian patience. To be able to wait, and sleep, and go hungry if need be, until the time has come to strike, and then to strike without hesitation.'

'You don't think, perhaps, that it has something to do with hoarding treasure?' said Mia.

He either didn't hear her, or chose not to respond. 'When I have things on my mind, or when I'm unsure of how to proceed, I like to stand at my window and look at the Temple Bar statue and think about that.'

So that's what he was thinking in the car, thought Mia. Dragon-thoughts.

He went to her own window as he spoke, and was looking through it into the night. 'But what I was getting round to saying is, maybe this dream of yours is the spirit of the city come to greet you, or bless you; to welcome your voice. Your eye.'

He did not look at her as he said it, the intimacy of the eye contact exchanged for the intimacy of his words. Mia felt again the sense of elements of a design converging, order emerging from what seemed like chaos, that she had last felt when Puck had held her cupped in his gaze.

Victor was still, rocking slightly from the balls of his feet to his heels and back again. He raised a hand and pointed to the patch of sky where the moon hung brave in the electric night. 'Look how bright,' he said. 'Is that what they call a hunter's moon?'

'No,' said Mia, without looking. 'A hunter's moon is the October moon in the northern hemisphere. This is July, so that's a Full Buck Moon.' And Blessing Moon in the Wiccan almanac, she thought, wondering what shady benedictions might be passing in Anne Ambleside's garden tonight.

Victor turned to her. 'A hunter's moon is the October Moon? I never knew it had anything to do with the months of the year. I assumed it had something to do with the colour, or the amount of light it gave, or something.'

'It was the moon of the hunting month for the Native Americans, when the deer were fat and they laid in their stores before winter.'

'What about a harvest moon?'

'Full Harvest Moon is the one before it, September, when there was enough light to do the harvest at night.'

'And a blue moon?'

'That's different. That's when there're two full moons within one month.'

'I never knew,' he said, delighted. Victor Adamus loved a neat explanation. 'Are there others? Tell me.'

'Well, let's see,' said Mia. 'January is Full Wolf Moon, February is Full Snow Moon, or Full Hunger Moon, some tribes call it, when the winter stores are running low, then there's Full Worm Moon, Full Pink Moon, Full Flower Moon – that's May, spring – Full Strawberry Moon, which is the strawberry season, then Buck, then the Corn Moon, which the fishing tribes call the Sturgeon Moon, when the sturgeon spawn, then Harvest, Hunter's, Beaver's, and December is Full Cold Moon, or Full Long Nights Moon.'

He listened, nodding as she sounded off each name, sometimes saying 'hmm', or repeating it, like responses in a mass. 'Isn't that marvellous,' he said when she had finished. 'It's the curse of being

born of city folk. I know nothing of natural rhythms. I have no sense of seasons.' It was the first he had ever mentioned of his origins.

'They're just names,' said Mia. 'There are lots of variations. And those are American. There's no reason why you should know of them even if you were rural.'

But Victor insisted that she say them again, and again, until he had the list memorised.

'Victor,' she said, when she had completed the circle of the calendar a third time. 'Do you believe in fate?' And now it was she who averted her eyes. She had never addressed him by his first name before. Or his second name, rather.

'Fate?' He repeated absently, and she could imagine that he was repeating the list in his head, harvest, hunter's, beaver's, cold, in one part of his brain while the other dealt with her question.

Full Buck Moon, he said under his breath with a curious descending inflection.

'Do you believe that everything happens for a reason?' said Mia.

'Everything?' said Victor. 'No.' He no longer avoided her eyes. 'But some things.'

He was close to her now, and she thought, with sorrow, *of course*, when he put his hands on either of her shoulders – the first time he had ever touched her – and bent his shaggy head down to meet her pale and rising face.

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At Embankment, Mia exited the train she was on and climbed onto another escalator, her shoes now held in one hand by the straps. They knocked against each other as if fighting. She was dreadfully cold, and shaking violently. Perhaps she was, after all, in shock from the fall, she thought, and wished she had grabbed something, anything, with sleeves, before she left the house. Each time something or someone touched her side, even her own elbow, she flinched. Her back was naked to the air, her feet were naked to the grime, and still every person she passed turned and stared openly. The crowd was large for this time of night, - the strike was still on – and the mood jostled and fractious. No one here was good at waiting. More eyes on her skin. Mia let them push past her as the tube arrived, deciding to wait for an emptier train. A man with a Zimmer frame had fallen heavily against her in the congestion of the people disembarking at Embankment, and she had crushed her metatarsals against the turnstile. She was nursing this latest injury as she boarded the Circle Line. She had no destination, but she needed to sit still as much as she needed to keep moving. She needed to try and formulate a single coherent thought.

The voice called the stations, the advertisements flicked past.

Minutes passed. People got off and on. Mia grew older. When the train had completed its circuit all the way back to Embankment, she disembarked, went back to the Northern Line platform, and took the next train to Tooting.

She climbed up out of the earth, and went to wait for a bus. Winos staring. The bus rattling up Southcroft Road full of Caribbean women who sat with their hands folded in the lee of their bosoms, and stared. A sleepy-eyed black baby, no more than eight months old, who stared hardest of all, and whose dark eyes and nut-brown skin reminded her of Melanie. *For your sake, I hope you believe that.*

Mia didn't press the button when they reached her stop. She peered out of the fuggy window to see if Victor's car was still there. It wasn't. She pressed the button at the next stop, climbed off the bus, and made her way back down the street towards the purple door. Let herself into the house, shed the green dress in a crumpled cylinder on the floor, and crawled into Helena's bed.

If she dreamed, she did not remember.

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Mia gasped for air that did not come, and her legs went slack under her. The sudden shift in weight caused her attacker to lose his balance on the uneven surface of the mountain road, and together they tumbled backwards. As they hit the ground the camera strap broke. Mia felt the awful pressure in her throat easing. Concentrating through the haze in her head she staggered up and begun stumbling away. Glancing back, she saw that the man, too, had gained his feet. She looked at his face and had an impression, for a moment, of negative space; an illusion that his face was a hole in the sky. Then he stepped out into the moonlight, and she saw the planes of his bones and the blood that crusted them.

That was when she heard Sam's voice, saw him pounding around the bend in the road. Mia, was the last thing she heard him shout before he tackled the stranger with the full force of his eighty-six kilograms. She saw them go down in a furious embrace, and then the beast with two backs, lurching nearer, and Sam's voice, shaky: 'Run, Mia!'

Mia ran.

'Mia?!'

She was just starting down the log-steps that had been set into the footpath above the sports-field when she heard his voice again, wordless.

Then the gunshot. The shock of it, of the sound, of what it meant, sent her tumbling blind, and then the world went quiet.

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Before the pain, she noticed the numbness.

She had awoken shivering, her knees drawn up, her hands clasped in the crook of her body, her thighs slick. One ankle had spent the night under the other, with its circulation cut off, and it was this lack of sensation that woke her.

Mia rolled over onto her back, awaiting the sick tickle of pins and needles. Her knees came with her, still articulated against her stomach, and when she tried to straighten them there was a stab of pain in her side.

She unfolded herself carefully, a seed pod breaking open, and lay for a moment, her eyes closed, still not quite awake.

Very soon she would remember what had happened the night before. She knew it was something bad, something terrible, but remembering exactly what, that could be delayed for at least another thirty seconds. Longer, perhaps, with this headache in the way.

Mia opened her eyes.

She rose, her head pounding, and left Helena's room to draw a bath.

She was wearing only panties, and when she turned round from the bath and caught sight of herself in the long mirror, she froze. Then each part of her body started individually, staggered, and she gasped a staggered gasp. She had gone a year back in time, no, a year and a half now, the garland of bruises was back around her neck; the chain that had kept her tied to the pole that she had run around and around and around until the day she learned the name and heard of the death of Isaac Butshingi. The slab of discoloration on her ribs, that was back too.

But her hair was mahogany and fox-red, not dark like the shadows of trees and tied up every which way. There was mascara and eyeliner smeared around her eyes, not tears and mud and blood. The bruises on her ribs were from her collision with Joe, not the stairs at Coetzenberg dam. And the daisy-chain, the torque of truth, the noose, it was a circle of... *hickey*s.

She laughed once, spasmodically: *HA!* – and remembered.

It was such an eighteen-year-old thing to have done, give his girl a hickey, mark his territory. *The mark of the beast*, she thought, and realised why people had stared at her on the escalator: she was marked. She must have looked like something out of Anne Rice, all dolled up and savaged like that, and – she was sure – very pale.

Mia touched the bruises gingerly, marvelling, as she had that first time, at the change she saw, this new self revealed in the skin, in this thinnest of membranes separating external reality from the carnage inside her body. The way the shape of things stood decrypted in that mirror. So *this is what the world is like*. But is it art?

Mia drew a bath.

The geyser in this building was an old and cantankerous one. Mia and Helena had had an arrangement for days such as these when the yield of hot water was wanting: one in the bath, the other bringing full fresh kettles on demand. But Helena was gone, and Mia sat in water cooler than blood until she shivered.

The tap was dripping, matt matt matt. She closed it with her toes. The drips stopped but the sound continued in her head. Matt matt matt matt matt matt.

Matt.

She had not thought of him until this moment. Fillette too, only now did the fact of Fillette arrive in her mind. Her thoughts until now, the treachery that had occupied her, had been her betrayal of Sam.

And suddenly it all came seething in, it would not, after all, be checked. The physical evidence of the memory of Victor sucking blood to the surface of her neck, that negative pressure, that dull draining pain of that did not seem like pain at the time, was bringing back the rest of it. Victor Adamus arching over her, the turrets and cornices and groined vaults of his body, she cantilevered off him, bevelled, dovetailed, buttressed, tongue-and-grooved. He had been ravenous; a starved thing, with no manners. She had finished before he did, despite herself. It shamed her now, that she had responded to him, if only on the basest level. Those reflexes went to the spine and straight back to the nerves, and cared not a whit what her brain might be doing.

It was London, she told herself. People did these things; people didn't think twice about doing things. And it wasn't as if they were *married*.

But Matt wasn't from London, and neither was she.

Neither, for that matter, was Victor Adamus.

From beneath the water, she heard her phone ring. She let it go to voicemail. It rang again. And again. At last, fearing an emergency, Mia left the bath.

She followed the ring-tone across the room, and found the phone beside the bed, crawling across the floorboards in palsied jerks, like a half-dead cockroach, as it vibrated. Mia's heart quickened sluggishly. *Matt*, the screen insisted.

She picked up the phone. 'Matt? Hello?' she said. There was no space in her throat, in her chest, for this part, the part where she pretended nothing had changed. Not yet. She tried to keep her voice steady.



'Mia!'

'What time is it?'

'It's eight thirty. Are- '

'Why aren't you in your venue?'

'The exam is only at nine thirty.'

'You told me it was at eight thirty.'

'No, I didn't. Mia -'

'You did, you said it was at eight thirty.'

'No I didn't. I said it was at *half nine*.'

'Oh. Right.'

'Mia, why didn't you *phone me*?'

She inhaled, but no air came in. How could he know already? And what would he have done, if she had phoned him? 'I... I'm sorry, Matt.'

'Are you all right?'

'Huh?' she said, utterly confused. No one, not even he, could be this selfless. 'Yes. No. Are... are you?'

'You're not hurt?'

'No...'

'You're in the paper. It says you fell on a sculpture.'

She fell backwards onto the bed, her ribs pulsing. 'Oh. That. Yes. Well no, I fell on a unionist.'

'Mia? Are you sure you're all right?'

'I'm fine. Bruised rib. Go and write your exam. Please, don't worry. We'll talk after.'

'Jesus. Thank God. I'm so glad.'

'I love you, Matt.' She might not have the chance to say it again.

'I love you. So much. I'll phone you right after.'

Immediately after she had closed the connection, the phone vibrated and screamed again in her hand, like a rodent, and she dropped it with a start. Picked it up again, answered. It was a number she did not recognise.

'Is this Mia de Vos?'

'Yes?' She was never going to get anyone to say that surname right in this country, she realised. Perhaps she should go back to De Villiers.

'Wendy Hawthorne; *The Inquisitor*. Could you spare a moment?'

'How did you get this number?'

'Would you be willing to comment on -'

'No.' She put down the phone, went to fetch clothes, brushed her hair. The bristles of the hairbrush stung on the hickies. He would see them; there was no way she could stop him from seeing them. He would ask, and she would have to think of something to say. I fell on my neck, she practised. I fell onto

Victor's mouth. Her phone rang again. Victor's private line. Mia let it ring and then switched her phone off.

Once she had dressed, she went to the newsagents to look at the papers. She knew the vendor was staring at her, but ignored him, until he said: 'Are you the girl in *The Inquisitor*?'

'No,' Mia answered, flipping through *The Times*, which Matt got delivered. Where would it be?

'Yes you are,' said the vendor. 'What's your name?'

'Cordoba.'

'Well he certainly had his fun with you, didn't he,' said the vendor. Mia looked up sharply. The vendor was looking at her neck. She opened her mouth, closed it. It meant nothing, he was just talking. She left the shop quickly. At home, even though there was no one to see, she put on a scarf.

She could do nothing but watch the clock. Matt would be writing for another two hours, then he would take another hour to get home. She had been staring at the second hand for fifteen minutes, too tense even to smoke, when she suddenly realised that it was Friday, and she was thus missing work. She had long ago booked herself every Friday morning shift at Fillette's. She would have to call in sick. She switched her phone on again to get the number, and dialled on the landline.

'Fillette Maddox,' came the answer.

'Hello, Heather, it's Mia,' said Mia.

'It's not Heather, this is Fillette.'

'Oh!' said Mia. She had expected to get the receptionist. 'Oh. Hello, Fillette.' Quickly, say it quickly and it will be over. 'I'm not feeling well. I'm sorry I didn't call in earlier, I've been a bit, I think I have, I fell at the gallery. I'm injured.'

'I heard.'

'Will you manage?' The mobile began ringing again.

'I think so.'

'Okay then.'

'I hope you feel better.'

'Thank you.'

Mia turned to look at the mobile phone. Victor again. She let it ring. When it had finished, the landline started. Mia jumped. She put out a hand towards the receiver, then hesitated, trying to remember if she had ever given Victor her home number. Not that it would stop him from finding it if she hadn't. She picked up.

'Hello?'

'Mia?'

'...Dylan?' They had not spoken in months.

'Yeh, it's me,' said Dylan. 'Everything okay with you?'

'I'm fine,' said Mia. 'Got off lightly. Bruised ribs.'

'What? What did he do to you?'

'What?' Who?'

'I read about you in *The Inquisitor*', said Dylan

'Yes? And?'

'There was a photo of you leaving a house with a purple door.'

'What?'

'Then another photo of a man called Rudolph Victor Adamus II, leaving the same house.'

Mia paused, processing. 'Oh God. Oh no. Really?'

'You were in a green dress.'

'Oh God.'

'And the article described you as 'running away in a state of evident distress.'"

'I wasn't running.'

'Anyway, I thought I would call and make sure you're okay.'

It's the end of everything, thought Mia.

'Why?' said Dylan.

'Why what?'

'Why is it the end of everything?'

'Did I say that?'

'Mia, what is going on?'

'I have to go.'

Mia put the phone down, retrieved the number of Victor's private line from her mobile, and called. The secretary put her through without even asking her to hold first.

'Victor. It's Mia.'

Silence.

'Victor?'

'I've been trying to reach you.'

'I know. Victor, have you seen -'

'*The Inquisitor*. My press agent told me an hour ago. You know, I *thought* we were being followed last night. I really should have learnt by now to trust my instincts.' He did not seem particularly worried. 'It was that hack at the gallery, you see.'

'He was with *The Guardian*.'

'Not that one,' said Victor. 'The woman. She had her own photographer. They were watching us.'

Miss Scarlet in the Bushes with the Camera. He sounded almost happy. 'Victor, what are we going to do?'

'Do?' he said. 'Nothing. Nothing litigious, if that's what you mean. It won't come to anything, and I've got my hands full already with the skywalk affair. In a way, I'm relieved that this part has been taken care of so quickly.'

'What's been taken care of?'

'Breaking the news. Don't you see, it's better this way. No long drawn out clandestine shifting of allegiances, no endless speculation and gossip. It's like ripping a plaster off. Short and sharp, then it's over.'

'What do you mean? What are you talking about?'

'We can be together now. In the open.'

Together now. In the open. An image assailed her: she attached to his person in the way she had been the night before, for evermore, as he went about his business, having phone conferences and okaying proposals and wearing hardhats. 'Victor, I'm not talking about what we're going to do to the tabloids. I mean what about *Fillette*? You have to, before she. '

'Fillette? She knows already.'

'What?'

'I told her that same night. You really should answer your phone once in a while.'

Mia felt sick. She had *spoken* to Fillette. Fillette had said nothing. God, she had spoken to her. She must have thought her the most unfeeling person in the world, not a shred of remorse, not a word. How could he be so cruel? (How could she?)

And then she remembered Fillette sitting on her purple-draped couch, blithely relating how Victor had cut his previous girlfriend dead, the actress, the day he had got together with Fillette. After waiting, waiting, waiting, for the moment to strike, waiting for three decades.

Mia thought of Sebastian, lazy-eyed and loud-mouthed, on the balcony at Fillette's house all that time ago, and began to hope for a war.

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His hands and feet, she had decided at last. It was in the hands and feet, and perhaps also, no, definitely also, the way that he hunched forward over any object or project that had his attention, the bones of his neck curved down, his shoulder girdles rolled forward, forming an awning of focus on the work or play he was engaged in. Always soft and sure, never hurried. Physically, this was where it lay, the similarity.

'May I ask why?' he said.

'I don't know.'

It was the pose she had captured in the last photo she had taken of Sam. She had considered, both before and after his death, attempting to draw it – a line drawing, not a painting – but had never been able to bring herself to do a single stroke. The possibility of making a mistake at any point was too oppressive.

Matt was fixing her Zippo for her as they talked. It was an old one that Sebastian had passed on to her, and she had never bothered to look after it, although she bought the necessary things; the flints, the wick, the fuel. She had struggled to light a cigarette as she and Matt commenced the discussion.

'You really don't have to do that,' she said.

Mia had hoped he would shout and storm. She had feared tears. What she had not expected, and what she now realised she should have expected, was this: this inward turning of the watchful eyes, and the calm, and the walls going up. And, to her horror and anger and shame, no surprise whatsoever. 'Just the once, was it?' he said.

'Yes.'

'And you don't know why.'

'I don't.'

He nodded.

Matthew Fletcher was still a long time while he finished threading the wick as if he had done it a hundred times. He turned the lighter over.

'It goes under the felt?' he said, pointing to the lighter fluid.

'Yes.'

He refuelled it, ignited it, snapped the lid shut, and handed it to her. Mia took it. She no longer wanted a cigarette.

Relieved of his one distraction, Matt rose to his feet and turned away from her. She knew why he had offered to fix the lighter. It gave him an excuse to look down, at his hands, and not at her neck. The marks were getting worse before they got better, as bruises do.

A hand went to the vulnerable skin at the nape of his own neck. He was comforting himself, Mia knew, and Matt didn't.

They were in the kitchen in Tooting. He had been running his hands over things constantly ever since he entered. The table. The counter. Scarlett the cat, who had arrived to greet him. His own knees, his clothes. Everything but her he touched.

I'm so sorry, Matt.'

Now he would hate her.

'Mia,' he said.

No: now he would leave her. 'Yes?'

'I have to go.'

'I understand.'

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*Dashing and daring, courageous and caring, faithful and friendly with stories to share.*

When Mia came to, it was with the echo, the memory, of a song in her head. She was also shivering, and – she realized with a sick jerk - gagging, on what she at first took to be some nightcrawler that had found its way into her mouth. She tried to spit it out before realizing, through the pounding in her head, that it was her own tongue. It had fallen asleep.

I didn't know that your tongue could fall asleep, she thought. Blood came out when she spat; she must have bitten it when she fell.

She had fallen, she now remembered.

*Gummi bears, bouncing here and there and everywhere.*

She was lying at the foot of the set of log steps that had been cut into the mountainside. Her face was angled such that the steps appeared to climb before her at a much steeper angle than they really did, and at the top, where the motor road lay, there was a haze of yellowish light. Mia lay looking at the haze of light for some time. She could not, as yet, quite remember how she had ended up here, lying on the footpath in the dead of night with *Gummi Bears* stuck in her head, but she did know that there was something up there, something at the top of those stairs, that she had good reason to fear, and that it was associated with the terrible hot pain in her throat. The headache was making it hard to think, and she did not want to sit up again in case the headache became worse.

A shadow crossed the light, a shape, a human shape. Then it was gone again.

Mia was becoming aware of the constituent elements of the situation gradually, one at a time, almost as though her senses were introducing them to her piecemeal, so as not to scare her.

First, then, the cold, then the numbness, then the pain, then the light on the road, and now a deep low thrumming sound, also from the road, which was very familiar. And at last, the memory of a sound at a higher frequency, a voice, a girl's voice, calling for help.

She tried to remember if it had been her own voice. But no, it had also come from the road.

*Somebody, help me!* Mia started. There it was again, as if questing for the memory in her mind had induced the world to produce a helpful repetition. It was Cassie's voice, and now it brought with it more information, the memory of another sound, a loud bang. There was a connection between these two: bang, help.

*Help.*

Bang, help.

It had gone like this: Mia!? Bang, help.

*This is what happened: someone attacked you, someone attacked him, someone told you to run, there was a gunshot, you fell, and now Cassie is up there on the road, calling for help.*

*Here are the names you need to know: Sam, Mia, Cassie. I don't know the name of the fourth.*

Mia looked at the dull yellow glow.

*Those are headlights.*

She turned her head, pine needles scratching her cheek.

There was a glow from below too, an industrial-strength glow, white and cold.

*Those are the floodlights on the Coetzenberg sports-field.*

The footpath she was lying on curved away to the right, downhill. At the end of that, she knew, lay another staircase, very narrow, very steep, that would take her all the way to the field. From there she could cross to the gym, or, if it was past ten and the gym was closed, she could run all the way to campus, to one of the streets on the *groenroete*, where she would find a security guard.

She looked back to the road.

*That noise is a car engine.*

He had demanded the car keys.

He must have found them after all.

Mia got to her feet, and, swift but quiet, she left the mountain.

## Full Corn Moon

When music is produced by more than one guitar simultaneously, the combination hits on the precise resonant frequency of female reproductive equipment, releasing the equivalent of aural pheromones. That is why a certain type of girl is always to be found in rooms with more than one guitar in them. It can be a recording studio or a rehearsal room or a green room or a hotel room, it doesn't matter. Put at least three musicians in a room that has at least two guitars in it, and make one of them either good-looking or famous, and another either foreign or rich, hook up to an amplifier, open a window, and wait.

If you don't get results quickly enough, add some alcohol. Weed works too, but then you get a different type of girl, and she'll be far less likely to be turned on by a good bass line.

This was the way the man in the black v-neck jersey explained it to Cassie, and it would be some hours before Cassie would realise that this was why no one had bothered to ask her name until they found out she was Justin's step-sister, here in this same L-shaped room in January, and why none of the new-comers were asking her name now. If it mattered, they thought, it wouldn't matter for very long.

'That's your theory?' was all Cassie said to him now.

'It may need some work.'

'Well then why aren't there any groupies in this room? We have six musicians, at least five guitars, and vodka. And weed.'

The man in the black jersey looked pointedly at Cassie, the little muscles in his mouth pursing. Cassie frowned. 'I am not,' she said, 'a groupie.'

She thought he was on the right track, this lavender-eyed Englishman – she had seen it happen, the effect he was describing – but his comments could be more fairly addressed to himself than to her.

He had not taken into account the fact of a female frontman, and perhaps particularly the fact of Susannah. Female groupies did not flourish in her sight.

If men were there, they might be ephemeral, but they were never anonymous or interchangeable: they were chosen for their ability to play a didgeridoo or for their back pocket pharmacopoeias or, most often, and as now, for their capacity to serve as auxiliary taproots to the current of irony that was



Susannah's impartment to the band and which ran through the floor of any of these gatherings like a livewire.

At this time of year, there was more diverse fare than usual to appeal to Susannah's rarefied tastes in yes-men.

The city had started changing, subtly, in late July, and now it was impossible to ignore. There was more music. There was more drinking. There were many more Australians, who accounted for a lot of the drinking. Anything with four walls and a roof had been transformed into a theatre, a rehearsal space, or a dormitory.

'Here we go,' the manager at the pub had sighed, the day they saw the first vanful of actors being disgorged into the street. Edinburgh people, Cassie had learned, react to the Edinburgh Festival the same way that island people react to the monsoon. It happened once a year, one must just accept that, and weather it, and stay indoors if at all possible.

At Quigley's, it was greeted with a mixture of dread and relief. They would be worked off their feet, but the bulk of the establishment's annual profit was also about to be made.

The manager had hired some extra seasonal lackeys, but even so they were pressed, and it would only get worse. In two weeks the tourists would start pouring in, and the mood would shift again, informed by Adidas tracksuits, moon-bags, camcorders, kids with sticky fingers, backpackers, and the much anticipated annual contingent of Fit Swedish Chicks. But for now, the city belonged to the entertainers.

Fresh troupes were arriving every day, from all over the world, and by sheer weight of numbers, as well as force of personality, they had invested this borrowed city with their character rather than adapting to its own.

These two were a case in point. Everyone else in the upstairs section was either an employee or a regular, and yet, within fifteen minutes of their arrival, the pair of London thespians had taken over; the conversation wrapping around them; making itself malleable to their will.

On the bench beside Cassie: a loose-limbed Slinky-toy of a man who alternately bounced as if he would never sit still and lounged as if he would never get up, and kept looking gamely at corners and objects as if ready to see the joke in them. On his feet: an athletically constructed man with breakers of flaxen hair and flaring nostrils who she would have written off as an overbred space cadet on sight, had it not been for the rabid gleam in his March Hare's eyes, and the fact that she had quickly found herself quite interested in what he had to say about AC Bradley.

He had been speaking non-stop in unhurried and complacent Received Pronunciation for the better part of an hour, pompously but intelligently, and often as not in French, while his counterpart jack-knifed comments over and under him in a Highlands accent which Cassie had taken at face value, until they had finished discussing the production of *Macbeth* that was on at the Aurora. He had then slipped into Bavarian, then a slightly less fruity RP of his own, before finally lapsing, or vaulting,

who knew, into generic North London, at which point he had fixed her in the mocking embrace of his delphinium gaze and engaged her in conversation.

'And what do you play?' said Sebastian. 'The triangle?'

'What would you know about it, anyway,' said Susannah. 'You're an actor.'

'I've been around the block once or twice, sister.'

'That,' said Susannah, blowing a smoke ring, 'I don't doubt.'

She, Susannah, was sulking in her own special way, which involved laughing her stainless-steel laugh and paying more attention to Justin than she usually did. Until now, she had been evidently delighted with her selection. But her chattel was misbehaving. She had seen Sebastian first, and quarried him, and here he was talking to Cassie as if he imagined he had a say in the matter.

Cassie looked from Sebastian (who she had pegged, on first impressions, as one of those tiresomely charismatic people who is perpetually trying to ensure that everyone knows he is the most original person in the room), to Justin, (who, in her opinion, was) and hoped that her step-brother would say or do something that she could react to in a casual, familiar way. He might not be *in* the band, but he evidently belonged here, and he was male, and handsome, and there was a guitar leaning against his leg like an adoring toddler, which he held steady with one palm while he spoke on the phone, as if to reassure it that it would have his attention presently.

In the room was also the rest of Vicious Spiral, Vicious Spiral's manager, Jack Gander, and three of the four members of Chicka Ferdy, the band who had supported them earlier at the Meadows. They had all been there: Susannah to perform, Cassie and Justin to support, and Sebastian and Dane, it transpired, to hunt.

Girls at the Edinburgh Festival were easy prey, said Sebastian. They all wanted to go home to London or Antwerp or Minnesota having slept with either an actor or a musician.

'An Irish actor?' said Cassie, amused, for this opinion he had delivered in an Irish brogue.

'I tried being a Scot last year,' said Sebastian. 'The thing is, they're not exactly in short supply here, and you always run the risk of accidentally chatting up a local. The Irish, on the other hand, is working a treat.'

Cassie laughed. Knowing it was faked did not seem to be doing much to prevent it from working a treat on her.

At her end of the room, Susannah laughed louder. Dane was trying to play a mandolin belonging to one of the members of Chicka Ferdy. It's owner, hitherto distracted by Tanya's midriff, turned swiftly and held out a hand. Please, he said. He was Croatian, although the rest of his band were not.

'So. Do you scheme you'll be heading back to Cape Town with one or two of these ouks under your belt, hey?' said Sebastian.

Cassie laughed again, and this time, it wasn't even to provoke Susannah. Not only had she not yet told Sebastian where she was from, but he had asked her this question in one of the best non-native South African accents she had ever heard.

'These ouks are my friends,' said Cassie. 'I told you.'

'Knew them when they were begging on the street, did you?'

'My step-brother used to be in this band,' she said. 'I came with him.'

The way fries come with a burger. The way Barbie comes with free glitter makeup that *you can use* too! There was more to it than that. Surely. She was, surely, more than a hanger-on. She was no longer laughing.

'Well,' said Dane. 'This has all been very charming. But we have a technical rehearsal to be making a hash of. Sebastian? Shall we wend our merry?'

'I'll be along in a minute,' said Sebastian, looking at Susannah.

'Bitsy wants us promptly at six-thirty.'

'Start without me,' said Sebastian, with his eyes hooded.

Until he had started talking to Cassie, Susannah had made it all too obvious that she was a sure thing, or at least, that she intended Sebastian to think so. She had, thankfully, given up on referring to him as Puck as if it was an old joke between them. Cassie had found it annoying on his behalf.

Cassie was not at all interested in Sebastian romantically, but before he started getting personal she had enjoyed his attention, and it would do Susannah no harm to be taken down a notch. All that aside, she had been most interested to discover that the play he was in was about goats.

'We're at the pub,' Justin was saying into the phone. 'Yes... where... Do you want me to come and get you? Oh, you're all right, mate.' He ended the call. 'That was Lucas,' he said to Susannah.

'Are they coming here?' said Cassie.

'Yes,' said Justin. 'He and Chris. Toby's gone off to meet his girlfriend somewhere.'

He was still wearing that bandanna; the only protection he had bothered to take against the sun. He had refused sunscreen, and had lent her his own dark glasses as noon assaulted the Meadows. Justin said he had strong eyes, that brown eyes didn't need sunglasses, which made Cassie feel asymmetrical, which was the story of her life. Before they left the house, she had tried to get him to put on a hat, at least, and he had picked up the bandanna from amongst her laundry.

That's been on a dog, Cassie had advised, but her had merely sniffed it, shrugged, and tied it on his head. Ever since, he had been walking like Johnny Depp.

'Did they see us perform?' said Susannah.

'Yep. They said they were in the back of the crowd.'

If the Edinburghers were unenthusiastic towards the festival, the rural folk were oblivious. The Carmichaels seldom attended any of its offerings, and Lucas never. He didn't like crowds. But they had all come down today.

Cassie and Justin had not managed to join up with the Carmichaels before the concert, as planned. They had waited as long as they could before entering the venue. 'He said there was some trouble on the way in,' said Justin, this time to Cassie.

'What kind of trouble?' said Cassie.

Justin shrugged. 'Didn't say.'

'Is he all right?' said Susannah.

'I'm sure he's fine, Susie.' Justin was directing his attention from one end the room to the other as if he were at centre court. So, Cassie noticed, was Sebastian.

Lucas and Chris arrived as Dane left, with Cole wearing his bootleg guide-dog jacket so that he could gain access anywhere Lucas did. 'Who's that great big blond cadge we passed on the stairs?' said Chris as he entered the upstairs room.

'Dane,' said Cassie.

'Looks it,' said Chris. He sniffed, frowning. 'How can you lot breathe? There's more ganja in this air than there is air.'

Rex was already extinguishing the roach. The appearance of two decent-looking salt of the earth types in the VIP section had, for some reason, disrupted proceedings: there was no sudden silence, but there was a distinct lull in tomfoolery. To Cassie: as if everyone else had suddenly become transparent and watery, and they, the Carmichaels, were real. It was Susannah who changed most immediately and obviously. She was in a state of aporia, trying to choose between the need to maintain her public persona in front of her entourage, and her desire not to be judged by two of the few people whose opinion really mattered to her.

'You got in in time?' she said to Chris.

'We missed the beginning,' said Chris. 'Bleedin chavs set their bloody greet pit bull on Cole.'

'What?' said Susannah.

'That's not quite true,' said Lucas. 'They didn't set it on him. But they let its leash run out full length so it could almost get him.' He was acting differently too, thought Cassie. Less sure of himself when he moved. When one of the members of Chicka Ferdy bumped into him, he laid a hand on the door jamb and did not move it.

'The cunts,' said Susannah. 'Is he all right?'

'Didn't blink an eye,' said Chris.

'Well let's get you two a drink,' said Justin.

'Ah, no,' said Lucas. 'I need to take this fellow home.' He patted Cole. 'I just came to say well done, Susie. You were all brilliant. The four of you have really come together since I last heard you live.'

'How are you getting back, Luke?' said Chris. 'I'm seeing *Macbeth* in twenty minutes.'

'Well, then I suppose I'll take the shuttle.'

'Let me run you up quick,' said Susannah.

'You're needed here, I'm sure.'

'I'll take you,' said Cassie.

'In what?' said Susannah.

She looked at Justin. 'Can I use the Station Wagon?'

'Ah, if you like,' said Justin. He fished in his pocket and threw her the keys. She missed the catch and they rattled to the floor.

Sebastian picked them up for her and dropped them into her hand.

'I do hope you'll come and see our play,' he said. 'It's very pretentious.'

'I don't see what's pretentious about *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.'

'You will,' said Sebastian. 'Have faith.'

'I'll make an effort,' said Cassie, getting to her feet.

'Before you go, I have a question.'

'Oh yes?'

He motioned her down towards him, then flicked his eyes towards Susannah and back again. 'Is there anyone you two *don't* squabble over?'

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'I'm not trying to say that the accused were unfairly blamed, just that it is necessary to blame someone, and to place the blame squarely on the shoulders of one party, without reservation or qualification, you have to reduce them to the purely symbolic,' said Cassie. 'You have to strip away their humanity, the mitigating circumstances, the reasons why, the orders from higher up – literally or figuratively speaking - and leave only the act, or the acts, for which they stand condemned. It's a lot harder to blame someone unequivocally once you have allowed yourself to understand how they came to be what they are.' She had been telling him about *The Butcher Boys*.

'And a lot harder to forgive them if you don't,' said Lucas.

'That goes without saying.'

Lucas smiled his quiet smile. 'My mistake.'

Cassie ignored the quiet smile. It was the only thing about him that sometimes irked her.

'It's meaningless to complain that the TRC did not serve the ends of justice,' she went on. 'Catharsis is simply not *about* justice. To assume the same means or the same end is to make another category mistake. It's not fair. But it is necessary. The demonisation, in itself, is not the problem.'

'What's the problem?' said Lucas.

Textual history in the making has it that in 1994 God indulged in either a stylistic conceit or a very forceful point when, after decades of tyranny, power passed into appropriate hands in South Africa as quietly as a lamb.

Cassiopeia Harris, for reasons which sometimes troubled her, and at times against her will, her better judgment, and certainly popular opinion, had it that this was all a big mistake.

She took a breath. 'The problem is that the accused weren't publicly put to death.'

'I am beginning to see why you might be worried about submitting this thesis of yours,' said Lucas, smiling.

The problem, not with Cassie's thesis, but, according to her thesis, with South Africa, was that the elements of the miracle – the resurrected martyr, the gracious abdication, and not least, the astonishing exercise in state-orchestrated thaumaturgy that was the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, had cheated history of its natural course.

'Think about it,' she said. 'One sacrificed in the city, one driven out into the wilderness. It's been done this way for centuries: oppression and injustice; execution and exile. Who did South Africa think it was to come along and have a bloodless revolution?'

Cassie knew she was talking too much. She was talking too much to stop herself from saying what she really wanted to say, which was to tell Lucas that Susannah had been behaving like a common floozy before he came into the room.

Susannah had immediately stopped flirting with Sebastian, and flirting with Justin in order to get Sebastian to flirt with her instead of Cassie, the moment Lucas showed up. Cassie herself had been flirting with Sebastian, and perhaps even vying with Susannah for Justin's attention, but she did not see why she should let the present situation be further complicated by mentioning this fact.

The present situation was in any case entirely in her head. She had not said, and would not say, a word to Lucas about Susannah. They were talking, instead, about her thesis, partly because Dane's synopsis of his play had got her thinking about it again, and partly because Lucas had asked her how it was progressing.

'It's finished,' Cassie had told him. 'Or as finished as it will ever be.'

They had long since arrived at Kilgry. Lucas had invited Cassie to go and pay her regards to the convalescent owl, and so she had parked at the farmhouse and set off on foot towards its quarters near Tom's house. Cole trotted on ahead, splashing through the water. Brock and Matilda had joined them on their way.

'Do you really think South Africa would be better off now if you'd had a civil war?' said Lucas. He was taking his shoes off as he spoke.

'No,' said Cassie. 'Not 'better.' I wouldn't venture to...What are you doing?'

'I am walking in the burn.'

'Why?'

'Because my feet are hot.'

Cassie took her shoes off too. The burn, with stupendous ludic whimsy, froze them. But Lucas continued to stride through the shallows for several minutes, doggedly.

Down in Edinburgh, especially when they had left the navigable dimensions of the bar and entered the healthy Saturday crowd on West Nicholson St, Cassie had for the first time observed the extent to which Lucas's independence was affected by his environment. He had been far from incapacitated – a stranger would still have been hard-pressed to decide if he was visually impaired, or just very bad at eye contact – but he walked more slowly, and she had noticed that he kept the side of his eye on Cole's back.

He had told her before that inasmuch as Cole served as an aid at all, it was in settings where Lucas was unsure of surfaces. He could see the motion of the dog's white body as he stepped onto strips of light that were actually kerbs or around shadows that were actually potholes; he could determine if an incline consisted of stairs or a smooth slope. This was why Cole had been coached to walk slightly ahead of his master, and not at heel.

As soon as they arrived on the Kilgry grounds, Lucas had visibly relaxed, straightened up, and let the dog off the leash, as if he couldn't wait to be unburdened of his vulnerability. Now he wanted his shoes off. He must have hated London, thought Cassie.

'A lot of societies don't seem to do much better after a bloody revolution,' said Lucas. 'You lot haven't ended up with a dictator, at least.'

'I'm not saying it's the better option. I'm just saying, we might not be in the precise situation we are now.'

'Which situation?'

'Girard called it The Sacrificial Crisis,' said Cassie. 'We're saddled with this burden of unexpended hate. The miracle, like most miracle cures, turned out to be bunk. Snake-oil. The wound wasn't lanced, so it's festering. It's beyond race violence or class violence or anything else so readily explicable. It's not about land or oil or religion. It's not even about money. It's guerrilla anarchy. People shooting their own neighbours for a sixpack of beer. HIV being spread like there's no tomorrow. Literally. The violence, the bloodshed, the retribution, it's happening anyway, but without any focus, indiscriminately, against surrogate victims. Gratuitously. *Senselessly*. Random, endless, arbitrary evil. And planeloads of those with the best intentions leaving every month, before it happens to them.'

'It's okay,' said Lucas.

'What?' said Cassie, turning to him. He was, of course, not looking at her.

'You just look a little agitated.'

'Oh. No. I'm not. Not really.'

And Cassie, coming up yet again against the perpetual mystery of what exactly Lucas could and could not see, asked him what he meant when he said she looked agitated.

'I mean you sound agitated,' he said. 'And your movements are agitated.'

'Oh.'

'It's just a turn of phrase,' said Lucas.

They came out of the pastures and onto the branch of the footpath that led to the stables. Cassie could see Ruby, her head angled between the fence planks to crop the grass outside the paddock. Gandalf had evidently escaped again.

They paused to say hello to the mare.

'I have one problem with your theory,' said Lucas. 'It doesn't take the idea of grace into account.'

'Grace?'

'The last blood sacrifice. Might not that have something to do with the ideology of the TRC? Perhaps it's not just a trumped up premodern ritual with the important bit left out. Perhaps it aspired to be something higher. Perhaps they were trying to emulate the ideal that nobody needs to be punished, so long as they accept guilt and repent. Why else did they put a man of the cloth in charge?'

Bishop Tutu, thought Cassie. The shaman, the wizard, the *pharmakeus*, consecrator of the magic, facilitator, interceder. And, in a way, the scapegoat himself.

'Since you mention that particular event,' said Cassie, 'It's been suggested that Jesus got caught up in a scapegoating ritual; a mixture of the Roman Saturnalia and the Babylonian "slaying of the god" ceremony, as adopted by the Jews. The Holy Week had been holy, to them, for a very long time prior to



that particular crucifixion. It was an annual event, and Jesus had the appropriate status. He was the goat who was sacrificed, Barabbas the goat who was set free.'

'Ah, you're a hard woman, Cassiopeia. Nothing is sacred.'

'It's not my theory. It's in *The Golden Bough*.'

'I know,' said Lucas. 'I've read it.'

'You've read it?' said Cassie.

'Years ago. I'd forgotten the details.'

'And you've been letting me rap on about Frazer?'

He smiled. 'You seemed to be enjoying yourself.'

She pushed his shoulder forcefully with her own. He laughed. 'You weren't only talking about Frazer,' said Lucas. 'Really, I would have stopped you if you hadn't been telling me a dozen things I'd never heard for every one I had. Besides, you had it coming.'

'How so?'

'For having let me 'rap on', as you put it, about jazz, when you evidently know as much about it as I do.'

'That's not so.'

They had begun walking again. The groundskeeper's house loomed white in the gathering dark, and they were silent the rest of the distance to the row of cages Tom had built when Lucas, age six, had started insisting on rehabilitating the snared stoats and rooks and foxes he had formerly dispatched to the hereafter without a thought.

The owl had been billeted in the largest of these. They had wedged a thick bough of ash across the cage to serve as a perch, but the bird was on the ground, strutting from one end of its quarters to the other with its flying saucer of a face snapping suspiciously in their direction, as if to check no-one's sideburns were past their earholes.

How unbird-like it looked, thought Cassie, with those front-facing eyes; the binocular vision it had evolved, as the mammalian predators had evolved it, as man himself had evolved it, to see, and to think, like a hunter: to calculate, deduce, gauge, solve problems. The owl's pupils had expanded to the size of Kruger rands.

Night was on its way; smells and sounds were becoming clearer, and Venus was visible. The troposphere had turned a lucent Magritte-blue that made the landscape seem more brightly illuminated than it had been half an hour earlier, rather than less.

'This is my favourite time of day here,' said Lucas. 'The gloaming.'

'The gloaming?' repeated Cassie. 'That's lovely.'

'"The time of day when it's not yet too dark to tell friend from foe," is how my grandfather used to put it,' said Lucas.

Cassie smiled, deciding that it was her favourite time of day here, as well. 'Do you... how do you know what people look like?' said Cassie. She had wanted to ask this for a long time, and felt the moment to be amenable.

'I make an educated guess,' said Lucas. 'Unless I know them really well.'

'What do you do when you know them really well?'

'I look at them really close.'

The eagle owl rotated its head to prove that it could and barked at Brock.

'She seems chipper,' said Cassie.

'The vet thinks she'll be able to fly again,' said Lucas. 'But we're at a bit of a loss as to what to do with her when she does. If we let her go in the forest she'll just make a nuisance of herself again.'

'Why don't you keep her?' said Cassie.

He smiled. 'Well. I'm off to London soon. I doubt she would take to it.'

'Oh yes,' said Cassie. 'I'd forgotten about that.'

She wanted to tell him that she would miss him. She had almost settled on 'We'll miss you.' But all she succeeded in saying was, 'Will you be gone long?'

'I live there,' said Lucas simply.

'You're not coming back?'

'Not to stay, no. I'll soon be done with everything I came to do.'

'And the band?' said Cassie. 'Will that be it, then?'

'Ah, lass. We'll have to see.'

She was mildly affronted by the return of the quiet smile and the Junior-Trivial-Pursuit tone, as if he was worried only about disappointing her.

'It matters a lot to Justin,' she said, defensively.

'It matters to me too, Cassie.'

'Because it matters to him.'

He nodded, and she was silenced.

Because he would be leaving soon, because she had not said she would miss him, Cassie invited him to look at her really close.

It necessitated his putting his face very near to hers, first on one side, then the other. He was there for a long while, looking not at her, but past her, using the four percent peripheral vision which was all the macular degeneration had spared him.

It was the closest she had ever had her face to someone who was not about to kiss her. She matched her breathing to his so that they wouldn't inhale each other's carbon dioxide, like she had beside Sam in the early days, when they still slept face to face. She had not noticed the brindled mix

of brown and blond in his eyebrows, or the way the line at the corners of his mouth extended beyond the fleshy part of his lips when he smiled. His eyes were grey. But that she had noticed before.

'Ah,' he said, and smiled lop-sidedly. 'It wasn't my imagination.'

'What wasn't?'

'You have eyes of different colours.'

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She remembered someone saying: *Should have brought a raincoat.*

She thought, how can you say a thing like that? What a thing to say at Sam's funeral.

But come to that – and it had – there was really not much one could say that didn't have that weight, that permanence, of writing, or of a statement made under oath, or words said to a priest in confession. By every syllable, every look, they were flying their banners, putting out their shields: this is how much I loved Sam. This is how much I am failing him. For some, to fall apart was to fail him. For others, not to fall apart was to fail him.

*Those who were with him at the end, those who loved him best, will remember him for the qualities demonstrated in countless smaller ways and with no less generosity of spirit throughout his life: his courage, and his selflessness.*

These words Felix had said in his eulogy, but he had left them out of the editorial. He had left them out of the editorial because they were intended for Cassie, for her to hear; her alone, in his sight. And he had turned his wild face on her, and she had cowered there, terrified, beneath his gaze, clutching the armrests of her seat, and thought, he *knows*. He knows. Somehow. He knows.

Somehow, Felix knew that it was all her fault; that she had made Sam do her bidding. It was always Felix who had been his confidante, and however Sam had painted it, Felix would have learnt enough to form his own opinion of her role in the moulding of Sam's future to her liking. He would have realised that she had pushed him and pulled Sam every which way; manipulated, coaxed, begged, railed, reasoned, whatever was necessary, whatever it took, to gain that extra year, the year they had spent together in Jonkershoek. And afterwards, she had pushed him again, to gain another two years, in London.

'He won a scholarship,' Cassie said to Lucas.

'So you said,' said Lucas.

'He won another scholarship, besides the one I told you about. To the San Francisco Academy of Music.'

Lucas nodded.

'They offer a Masters in Jazz Composition there.'

Lucas nodded again.

It was partly the darkness that was accepting them into its thickening reaches as they walked back along the pastures to the Shire. It was partly the fact that he had reminded her so much of Sam, there at the piano. It was partly the fact that he, Lucas, had read a Masters in Performance at the London Royal College of Music, where they did not offer a Masters in Jazz Composition. And it was partly the fact that they had both been unable to sleep that night after the Easter party. But mostly, she thought, it was the fact that there was no judgement in his eyes as she spoke. Not even so much as an opinion. He simply listened, and when she had finally run out of things to say, he said, I see.

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When Cassie came home to Morningside that evening, she found a note on the fridge in Justin's hand: *Sleeping as am shattered. Tell Rex to keep it down if in, and please wake me @ 21.00.*

Most of the letters were baby capitals rather than lowercase, and, astoundingly, he had signed it with his signature: his surname coasting in an upward arc on the great slewing bow-wave of the initial S, and the whole affair channelled between the firm lateral stroke of the capital J and an even firmer underscore. His l's, throughout the note, were dotted with complete circles. Here was a man with a healthy complement of self-belief, thought Cassie. Here was a fellow with fame and fortune on the brain.

*We'll have to see*, Lucas had said. She hoped that the blow, when it came, if it came, would not fall too hard on him.

She took down another note in her own hand: *Buy Milk*, opened the fridge, put the milk she had bought herself inside it, and went through the living-room to her bedroom, tip-toeing past her step-brother's spread-eagled form.

He had been sleeping in here on the living-room bed since the weather grew warmer; partly because his room had 'become too small' in the heat, and partly because the couple on the upstairs floor, after two weeks of lusty arguing above the living-room, had now taken to hours of lusty reconciliation above his bedroom.

Spring, evidently, had sprung.

At the end of June, Cassie had, for a second time, unpacked boxes, this time containing her own things, into her own bedroom. She, Justin, and Rex had moved into the first floor of a duplex in Morningside. It was considerably less pokey than the Marchmont flat, but for all that Cassie thought she would always miss the smell of rising damp.

'Are you sure about this?' her father had said, carrying her heaviest suitcase into the house. As if there was still time, even now, to change her mind.

Alexander Harris had bought them new furniture and furnishings, helped them transport and unload it.

He did not argue with her decision to move out, but he found plenty of fault with the place she was moving into. There's no alarm system, he said. There aren't any burglar bars. A child could climb that motorgate.

To be sure that she would be safe in at least one way, he had bought a new car, and ceded the Station Wagon to his daughter and step-son to share between them. Justin was to understand, he said, that the main purpose of the car was to avoid Cassie having to take public transport after dark.

At eight twenty, Justin was still sound asleep. Cassie, pretending to herself that she was annoyed by the necessity to keep her noise levels down, put on some music (Surfjan Stevens) and when that failed to stir him, she put on Metallica. Nothing. At last, she waggled his foot.

'What time is it?' said Justin.

'Eight forty.'

'I said to wake me at nine.'

'Beggars can't be choosers,' said Cassie. 'Why didn't you just set an alarm?'

'I did that too.' He sat up, rubbed his hair as if to charge it. 'You interrupted one of the wickedest dreams I've ever had.'

In the time she had known him, Cassie had not once seen Justin engage in any intentional effort at physical exercise, but as he got to his feet, shirtless and in jeans, she observed that, for all that, he was almost toned. As he stretched and told her, yawning wistfully, about his wicked dream, her eyes were drawn to the twin dents that sloped in beside his hipbones, that section of lower belly that the De Villierses referred to as the Pitt Region, in honour of Brad Pitt's shining example of the form. He obscured them beneath one of the short-sleeve surfer-brand shirts he favoured, sniffed his armpits, and put on a fresh layer of deodorant.

'What's the occasion?' said Cassie.

'I'll tell you if it works out,' he said.

'So it's something music basket related?'

He smiled. 'Perhaps.'

This was so much like Sam; he only wanted to tell her things, for better or worse, once the results were in. Justin assumed the same reticence of other people. He rarely asked if something was wrong or right with her, although he had his own ways of making himself available in case she should discover a need to talk to him.

Now, for instance, while getting himself something to eat in the kitchen, he made her coffee with vanilla ice-cream instead of milk and sugar - something he knew she only indulged in when she felt deserving of it - and brought it to her where she sat, along with a couple of the oatcakes to which she had become devoted. 'I'll be back at about eleven if you want to hang out,' he said.

'Adeus.'

'Anon.'

Cassie was left again to her thoughts, which disconcerted her with the way they seemed to fishtail and trifurcate unnaturally. She could not rein them in. She could not find a comfortable position to sit in, or a room of the right shape, or clothes of the right weight. She turned off Metallica and tuned to a radio talk show for the company of voices. Music was too musical and silence was too silent.

A confession, by all accounts, was supposed to leave one feeling unburdened. But if a weight had indeed been lifted, its space had so quickly been occupied by a new one that she noticed no difference.

It was all that talk about grace. It had made her think about Felix. She regretted it already.

What might Lucas make of her now? Cassie worried about it in a way that simply didn't figure in having talked about some of the same things with Justin. Justin had known anyway; providing further information, even private details of consciousness, as she had, was no more than conversation, further conversation, along the same lines as what had gone before. It was a new tributary feeding the same river. Besides which, it was only Justin. But she had told Lucas the part she hadn't told anyone, not even Dr. Patel, and now the course of their relationship had been diverted irretrievably. They were angled differently towards one another. Unless or until he offered her something of equal magnitude, he would remain the confessor; he had given her the absolution of his confidence. She was indebted. She would need to see him again, soon, she decided, and be as normal as possible, as if it didn't matter to her, as if she had long since accepted and worked through it, her guilt, as if she had merely been making conversation.

People did that, didn't they? Talked about their past wounds and trials. It was how one turned acquaintances into friends.

Cassie thought she might try and get it out of her head by writing it down. She went to fetch her journal.

Between finger and thumb she held the chunk of pages that she had used in the back. It was now thicker by half than the section that she had started writing from the front. She turned back to the front, and picked up a pen.

*Dear Sam*, she began, and stopped.

Never once since she had started corresponding with his memory had she opened with *Dear Sam*.

A key rattled in the door. It was Rex, stoned as Oscar Wilde and still buzzing from the performance earlier that day. He made a pit-stop in the kitchen before coming through to the living-room with the tub of vanilla ice-cream in one hand – Justin had left it on the counter – and a spoon in the other. Rex was better than no one. At least he had plenty to say.

Did Cassie hear them? Did she notice what Rex had done with his solo on *Stripped*? Did she see that Skanky Dutch Chick who had her tits out on the bloke's shoulders?

Cassie said she had heard, she had noticed, she had seen.

'The Lynx is right, we've come together,' said Rex. 'They were shouting for us as loud as they shouted for Windigo.'

Cassie did not think this was quite true, but opening for Windigo at T in the Park was the coolest thing that had ever happened to Rex, and she thought he deserved every ounce of gratification it gave him.

'Yeah,' said Cassie. 'You were more than the sum of your parts.' She said this because it was true, and because she knew he would appreciate it. She did not realise she was helping him make a decision.

'Susie was on top form too,' he went on. 'It's a real shame, I think, sometimes, that she and Silveira couldn't put their differences aside. If he hadn't of bagged Mrs. McKenna there might still of been a -'

'He told you that story?' said Cassie.

Rex frowned, taking the ice-cream spoon out of his mouth. 'I thought he told everyone that story,' he said. He looked down at her journal. 'What's that you're doing? Not more work.'

Cassie closed the counter book. 'It's not work, no.'

'Why are you skulking at home on a Friday night, anyway? Come out with us.'

'Thanks, Rex. I'll wait till Justin gets home and see what he feels like doing.'

Rex went to have a shower. Cassie opened the journal, looked at the two words she had managed to write: Dear Sam.

Dear, dear Sam.

She thought again of his nocturne, the different side of him she imagined it revealed, the conscientious way in which he had sought to take control of its destiny.

There was another reason she had not given it to Lucas, that day he came to lunch in Cramond. She had worried, in a distant, overprotective way, that he might consider it anything less than brilliant beyond all reckoning as a piece of musical craftsmanship. Of all her reservations, she had considered this one the least rational, but now it seemed perfectly valid.

Cassie made up her mind once and for all that she would never let him see it. Now that he had passed judgement on Sam as a man, she did not think she could bear it if he passed judgement on the music too.

He, Sam, had written it the year before they met. Had she turned Sam into what he became? she wondered. Had she nurtured his weakness?

At ten thirty, Justin came home. She heard him humming up the stairwell.

'Did everything go mysteriously well?' she asked him.

'It went okay.'

'Rex wants us to go out in the Cowgate.'

There was a smile playing about the corners of his mouth, not of amusement, just exuberance. 'I guess he and I do have something worth celebrating, at that.'

'Out with it,' said Cassie.



'Remember that demo I sent to Fresh?'

'They're going to play something?'

'Better.'

Justin had been to see a guy he knew through another guy who had seen them play as Scheherezade at a Bandslam in uni . This guy used to be a DJ on Fresh, and he had been a fan of Vicious Spiral since the early days and knew Justin had more than a little to do with their first album. He was no longer in radio, he was now producing with a little indie label in London. Another DJ at Fresh had played him a track off the demo, and he had liked it, and he had said that he couldn't promise anything, but that he would make sure that Justin's demo would at the very least cross the desk of his boss, who, Justin would be interested to know, had always remembered Quigley's fondly.

'They're going to give me a call.' He smiled his terrifying smile. 'I think I've got us an audition.'

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'Davy?' said Mia, kneeling by the TV shelf. 'Davy!'

'Wait, wait.'

'I'm in a hurry.'

'Now look, you made me lose a life. What is it?'

'Have you seen my *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* DVD box-set?' She had brought it here to introduce Matt to the series, but they had never got round to that in the end.

'Oh, was that yours? I lent it to Camille.'

'You knew it was mine.'

'I didn't think you would mind.'

Mia had waited for a time of day when she knew Matt would be out to go to Lambeth and fetch her things from his house. As she found out when she let herself in, she needn't have bothered. Davy was there, playing X-Box, and he told her that Matt had gone up north.

Mia had brought two boxes along, but only found enough of her stuff to fill one.

She sat down, cross-legged, on the floor, exhausted. Davy came up behind her and leaned his knees into her back.

'Stop that,' said Mia. 'Where are my DVD's? Can't you call Sham... Camille?'

'I'll get them for you later.'

'I need them now.'

He toed her sad single brown box. A toothbrush. Some clothes. A book. 'You and Fletchy on the out and out, then?'

'It's over.'

'Aw. Thought as much. He's been moping around like black Sunday. What happened?'

'I'd prefer not to talk about it,' said Mia, marvelling for the hundredth time at the differences between men and women. They lived together, it was a week since they had broken up, and Davy, apparently, knew nothing of it.

'Come on, tell Uncle Davy. What's happened?' He began to knead her shoulders. 'You're so tense,' he said. Mia got to her feet.

'Stop, please,' she said. 'Not now.'

Suddenly there was a dent in the middle of his monobrow. 'I've had just about enough of you,' he said, at which she was incredulous. He was moving towards her, at which she was more incredulous. If he had had just about enough of her, surely he would be going in the other direction?

He was pushing her up against the bookshelf. He was strong, and he had learned his lesson well: her wrists were already in his hands. 'What, I'm not good enough for you? Eh, miss high and tighty? Don't act like your twat don't stink. I know all about -' But Mia twisted one wrist out of his grasp, stuck

a finger in the slobbery mouth, and before he could say what he knew all about, she began fish-hooking him.

'Aggghaaghrr, leh oh, leh oh,' said Davy.

Mia let go.

She picked up her box and marched towards the door. 'Fuuuuucking Saffers!' she heard Davy say behind her, his voice muffled through the hands covering his injured mouth.

As soon as she was out of sight she allowed herself to run. She ran down three flights of stairs and through the parking lot.

I run, thought Mia.

I am running, thought Mia.

Then she slowed and began walking swiftly up Frasier Street. She breathed. Yellow, she thought, and her eye spotted the old peeling jungle-jim in the schoolyard, but there was nothing else yellow in any direction, as far as the eye could see.

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There was a Monkey's Wedding in Tooting when Mia emerged out of the earth: rain and sun together. Despite the load of the box in her arms, she walked to Southcroft Road rather than take a bus. She wanted to feel the water landing on her skin and breathe in the smell of hot tar-dust that the rain would release from the street.

A half mile on, the bottom of the box fell apart and her belongings landed on the ground. A ceramic incense burner broke. Mia knelt to gather everything else. Two people passed on her side of the road, and neither offered to help her. She wanted to spit in their faces.

There was too much to carry in her hands. Mia shoved what she could into her handbag and put the rest back in the soggy box, holding one hand beneath it to keep the folding flaps in place. The bus went by a stop: she was not close enough to the bus shelter to be reckoned a commuter and did not have a hand free to hail it. Mia wanted to spit on the bus, too.

It was thus soaked and bedraggled and encumbered that she finally made it to number 68.

At the door was Matthew Fletcher.

In her kitchen, Matthew Fletcher.

His parents were well. His brother was well. His sister-in-law well. The baby, Mo, had said his name.

Mia said his name. She asked him why he was there.

'I came to apologise,' said Matthew. 'For leaving you. I really only intended to go for a couple of hours, and walk a bit, and think. I'm sorry it turned into more than a couple of hours. I came to say that. And to tell you that I'm not going to leave you again.' He greatcoat was soaked through, the lenses of his glasses dappled, his hair and his lips wet.

He had helped her carry her belongings indoors, careful not to touch her hands.

'I've just been to yours,' said Mia. 'Davy said you'd gone up north.'

'I came back,' said Matt.

His face so familiar, she could feel the smooth wet bones of it beneath her palm, although she had not touched him in weeks and did not touch him now. The watchful otter's eyes she had suffered under. She would release him, relieve him of this. But he had not finished.

'I've put down a deposit on that place in Angel,' he said. 'I'm going to move there.'

'You are?'

'I'd like you to move there with me. If you still want to.'

'You... would?'

He paced soundlessly from one end of the room to the other, finally came to a halt across the kitchen table from her, his hands on the back of the chair that had become his. He wanted the table between them.

'Mia. I know all about your friend Sam. Your sister told me.'

'What? When?'

'Just before she left.'

'You know about Sam's death?'

'Not just that. She told me everything. About what he did, how he left you for Cassie.'

Mia drew a chair back and sat on it. Matt stayed on his feet.

'You see, Mia, I know why you did it. I know you were trying to hurt me before I could hurt you. And I know that it's because you love me. And I love you too. So I'm going to prove you wrong. I'm not going to leave you. And I'm not going to let you leave me.'

There it was again; not a question, not a request, not even a suggestion.

She remembered the three of them in the kitchen together on another rainy day. He sitting across from her at this same table with the paper open in front of him, reading aloud a story on South Africa which had made international press. Helena, passing behind him and reaching up to get a bowl from the cupboard, had balanced herself with one hand on his shoulder, and he had leaned his body the other way to give her more support, his eyes still on the page.

Mia felt duped, as if it was he who had deceived her. Why didn't you tell me you were strong? She wanted to say. Why did you lead me to believe that you were weak?

'I'm not him, Mia,' said Matt. 'I'm not Sam.'

'I know,' said Mia, in a small voice. She had known for some time.

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They tried. It was not her place to turn her back on him, so they tried.

Together they moved to the flat in Angel that he had, after all, purchased. It was Matt who arranged her easel and all her equipment in the second bedroom that was to become her studio. But Mia hardly set foot in it.

She was not doing work of any kind during this time, and complained that she could not sleep. Matt knew that this could not be so: she talked very often in her sleep now. Before first light she would turn towards him, her lips and fingers seeking him out like some like some crepuscular forager, her words loud enough to wake him.

It's a paper house, she murmured one dawn.

You're right, thought Matt. Their salvaged love, the redeeming power of his grand rainsoaked gesture, was a fiction he could not sustain unaided. Not once he recognised that the braided loop of need and debt that bound them to each other had been his alone in the fashioning.

He had often watched her sleeping, in the early days. Waiting to be seen by her. In her presence he had become his own shadow, the self in negative, values reversed, and she the firelight that made him come alive and dance. Until and unless she saw him, he did not know who he was, anymore.

It was only when he returned that he saw at last that it was not, after all, fear that had driven her from him. It was fear that had kept her by his side. She did not love him. She could not leave him, he had made it impossible. And he had made it impossible for himself to leave her. Not only had he promised Mia he wouldn't: he had given his word to Helena.

They had long since halted in the airport arcade, and Helena's check-in time was upon them, when Helena had finished telling him everything, and still she talked on, recapitulating, looking for a way to approach the thing that she wanted to ask him, ask of him. 'She cut her teeth on it. Back then, not when he died, but when they broke up – if they were ever really together – in those days, understand, Mia was so... *niksgewoond*, it was like the whole world had failed her. Everyone, I suppose, has that experience once, that first time, that day the world breaks faith with you. You know?'

'That word,' said Matt. 'I've heard it before. What does it mean?' She was looking for the English, had filled the gap for the sake of it with the meaning she was trying to produce, and moved on past.

'Which?'

'Niks...'

'Oh. I was trying to think of the English. naive, I suppose, is the closest.'

'Naive' said Matt. 'Okay.' So he was so *flipping* naïve. Not particularly dignified, but not as bad as, say, being so *flipping* perverted, or so *flipping* malodorous, or so *flipping* –

'Ignorant,' added Helena, with a kind of distracted intentness. 'Unschoolled.' It was far from consequential, but she was a lover of words, and the academic habit of coming to as disciplined a transliteration as possible was both soothing and self-asserting. 'But in the ways of the world, particularly.'

'Right!' said Matt. 'I see. I've got it, now. Thanks.' But she was relentless.

'Non-worldly. Bumpkinish. Literally, it means 'not used to anything.' She looked at him. 'Like Candide, or Forrest Gum-' she snapped her mouth shut on the dawning truth, thus inadvertently supplying the final damning plosive. Her face was reddening as his greyed, as if the colour were being leached from one to the other.

'Right,' said Matt. 'Okay.'

'But *innocence*,' Helena insisted hurriedly, 'is at its heart, really.'

'It's okay,' said Matt, and smiled, and because this was Matt's gift, Helena was sure that it would be.

'What I'm basically saying,' said Helena, 'is that I think, for some reason, she's only beginning to deal with it now. Or I should say rather, she's only just beginning to *fail* to deal with it now. Not just his death, everything that happened before that, too. With Sam, and perhaps even other things. Our father leaving. It's as if the whole thing was put on ice, until...' Helena stopped, frowned, thinking, reviewing, reappraising. 'Until Cassie came,' she said. 'Until Cassie came into her life again. I think that had something to do with it.'

Matt had, to begin with, little notion of the crisis Helena seemed to believe was on the cards. But then again, he thought, he being so flipping *niksgewoond* and all, it was hardly surprising that he had failed to pick up the signs. He and Mia were fighting more often, it was true. And she had seemed different. Distant. But certainly not on the point of some sort of breakdown. He had never thought of Helena as a woman who tended towards melodrama, though, and was willing to believe that there might be more to it; factors, symptoms, that she was hesitant to delve into, or that she could see and he could not.

'I just wanted to ask you,' said Helena, 'please, just... take care of her. You're the only person in a three hundred mile radius that I trust to do what's best for her.'

With this vote of confidence, Matt understood that Mia's sister was really saying: prove me right. Don't fail her. And he knew what would set her mind at ease.

'I mean to marry her,' he had said, simply. 'In time. If she'll have me.' He smiled. He had wanted it to be good news, in itself, whenever it came to that point. Not just something to assuage her fears. But Helena needed reassurance, and he was glad to be able to provide it unstintingly and sincerely.

She had smiled back, and kissed him on the lips, because he was as near as made no difference to family, now. Then she left at a trot for her plane.

We rarely have the privilege of knowing beforehand when it's going to be the last time. But that night, Matt knew. He lay awake for a long while after Mia had fallen asleep, staring into the darkness, watching the clench and flinch of her small form beside him, listening to the changes in breathing that relayed news of her uneasy passage through the dreams she would not remember.

It's a paper house, he thought. He was merely staying so as not to leave. How could he explain it to her? Was there some way to set her free without abandoning her?

He lay beside her in a bed in Angel and thought of the morning of his eighteenth birthday, lying in the rain in a field of daffodils in Cornwall. He had just finished high school, and had thought to start a three-month backpacking tour of Europe by working as a picker. Every day they started before dawn, and almost every day it had rained. He still woke occasionally, as he had now, from languageless dreams of bulbs and stems and wet yellow in the darkness.

For the duration of that month, he had assumed he was miserable. He was away from home, he slept in a shack, he did not know what to do with his life, he had nothing in common with the Poles and Lithuanians who picked many more daffodils an hour than he could, he had had his heart bruised by a tow-headed girl who forsook him to become an air hostess.

But Matt remembered it now as a time of perfect contentment, or rather, perfect containment, a self-containment and self-sufficiency he had taken for granted and assumed to be an immutable property of himself. He remembered that field as one of the last stations in his life before these assumptions were discarded; before the unquestioned invincibility of his teens had been quashed, drained, by the experiences of his twenties. There in that field, and in the few years before and after that field, his strength had depended on nothing, nothing other than the continued, inexorable bounding of his heart in his chest. Work and responsibility and his mother's diabetes and his father's retrenchment and several disappointing love affairs had plucked it out, in bits and ragged pieces, and he had become, not bitter, but depressingly accustomed, to having it taken from him without his consent.

With Mia, he had wished, for the first time, to give it away freely, this autonomy he had guarded so jealously for so long. He wished to be vulnerable to her, he wished for them to be vulnerable to one another. He wished them to be interdependent.

He had wished to be trusting, and naïve, and innocent, and unused to anything. And unused.

He did not notice that she had become not so much a chosen weakness as the source of his power.

Only apart from her had he begun to feel himself independently whole again; apart, he had become convinced he could return to her. He would stand against her, she could lean against him. They would be equal halves.

Matt woke in the early hours of the morning with a memory of yellow petals and soft black earth behind his eyes, and wondering why, he became gradually aware of her voice whispering into the

darkness. He heard the sibilant tails of hushed yes's, and turned, and saw Mia sitting upright in the bed, her unblinking eyes dry-red, staring into nothing, and answering nothing's questions.

Mia, he said, Mia, who are you talking to?

It's quite all right, said Mia. You needn't worry. It can't get out, you see, it's trapped.

He realised she was dreaming, and knew enough to talk her out of it gently. Who is trapped? He said.

Mia turned her eyes on him. Mia!? she said.

This was enough to scare him into instant formicitis, to hear her addressing herself in bewildered panic.

Run, Mia, she said.

The next day Matt discovered there was no need to explain anything. She had left a note: *I'm going because you can't. Thank you for everything. Do whatever you like with my stuff. Don't come after me.*

She had not signed it.

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When she imagined seeing him again, it was always alone. In a car, in a room, by the burn, but alone. Instead, the next time Cassie encountered Lucas Carmichael, it was in a crowded pub, at one of her tables, in the company of both his brothers, his honorary sister, and Daniel Sheach.

Cole lay curled by his chair. They had been to watch the Military Tattoo, and had come down for dinner.

Justin was acting manager that day, and he had taken a seat with them. It fell to Cassie to bring them drinks and snacks for the next hour and listen to their laughter, which seemed, in her imagination, to erupt only when she was at the other end of the room or behind the bar.

She had told Justin about her conversation with Lucas; what she thought of as her confession. Justin said he didn't see why it was a big deal. That Justin didn't see why it was a big deal was both tryingly typical of him, and temptingly reassuring. He had two pertinent things in common with Lucas that made his reaction a more plausible yardstick than her own: he was male, and he was impartial.

'People do,' Justin had said. 'Open up to him.'

If Justin didn't see why it was a big deal, perhaps Lucas wouldn't have seen why it was a big deal either.

Perhaps, thought Cassie, measuring a whisky, it simply wasn't a big deal.

'Working on the Lord's day, lass.'

She looked up. Lucas. He smiled. Cassie smiled back, glad, in the way that she had had cause to be glad several times, that he couldn't see her expression. 'Somebody's got to do it,' she said. 'What can I get you?'

'Nothing. I just wanted to return this. I keep forgetting.' He took from his pocket the bandanna she had tied on Cole's leg and placed it on the bartop. It was washed and pressed and seemed not much the worse for wear.

'Thanks,' she said. 'Is he all right?'

'He's fine.'

'And the owl?'

'Also fine, it would seem. She escaped yesterday.'

'Oh!' said Cassie, disappointed.

'At least it means she's healed up,' said Lucas. 'She'll have to fend for herself again now.'

She was about to say something more, but Chris had risen from the table, and now he came to stand beside them at the bar.

'And what can I get you?' said Cassie.

'Your brother.'

Justin had gone back to the kitchen. She went to fetch him as requested, and Chris asked him for a word. She saw Chris cocking his head towards the window and saying something inaudible. Justin came round the bar and looked through the plate glass.

'What's up?' Cassie asked following their glances.

There was a group of chavs hanging around on the pavement outside the bar. Their attention was on the Carmichaels' table.

'It's the same ones,' said Chris Carmichael quietly.

'The same ones that set their dog on Cole?' said Justin.

'Aye.'

Justin gave a brooding nod. 'I know them. They're always in this area. They've tried to steal stuff off the beer truck three times.'

They had no dog today, but they were clearly in a mood to be entertained. There were four of them: two smallish bald ones, a medium-sized bald one, and a large one in a Burberry cap. At that moment they appeared to be conferring, and now they strode, in a casual row, through the front entrance, and took the empty table across from where Susannah and Daniel were sitting.

'What do we do?' said Cassie.

'Not much we *can* do,' said Justin, livid. 'Serve them.'

Cassie served them..

They were harmless enough for ten minutes or so, and Cassie felt the mood of her tableful of friends stand down. That was when the smallest one started singing.

*Special Fred*

*Momma dropped him on his head*

*Now she keeps him in a shed*

*Cos he's a little bit special*

He was looking at Danny. Susannah blanched.

'Get tae feck,' she shouted. Justin went across to their table.

'Please leave,' he said. 'You're not welcome here.'

'Leave?' said the biggest chav. 'Why would we want to leave?'

'Get out,' said Justin. 'The lot of you.' He pointed to the door.

The large chav stood, squaring up to Justin.

There followed the ageless sound of chairs being drawn back simultaneously and meaningfully, as the other chavs, Rex, and all three Carmichaels rose from their places.

'Are we going to have a problem, Guido?' said the chav.

Seconds out, said one of the other patrons into his beer.

Everything from this point seemed to Cassie to happen very slowly, although it was all over very quickly. She perceived, also, a kind of dogged determination on the part of all concerned, as if they had all done this before many times, in this exact setting, with these exact *dramatis personae*; as if it were just another Festival offering nearing the end of a long and draining run.

The large chav pushed Justin in the chest and called him a chutney-surfing wop. Justin pushed back. The chav dropped his beer. Rex knocked a chair aside and punched the large chav in the face. The chav grabbed him by the hair. Rex ripped his earring out and he screamed. The medium-sized bald chav attacked Rex. Toby tackled the medium sized-chav. The two small chavs attacked Chris. Lucas grabbed one of them by the shirt. The large chav shoved Lucas, and Lucas fell over the chair that had been knocked over by Rex. Everyone in Cassie's party sucked their breath in as his hand landed on the broken glass of the first chav's dropped beer.

Cole, as Lucas had once said, wouldn't harm a fly. He sat patiently while the residents at Kilgrey attempted to redesign his extremities. He ignored other dogs, as he had been trained, never so much as barked at a person unless it was absolutely called for, and emitted but a whimper when attacked by owls. But he rose up now in cold white outrage, and without even bothering to growl, launched himself at the throat of the man who had assailed his master. The chav roared and collapsed beneath his weight, his Burberry cap flying off, his hands taking the greater part of the methodical damage that Cole would otherwise be doing to his throat.

Cassie was nearest to the dog at that point, and she did a brave thing, grabbing him by the collar and pulling backwards. Her efforts did little to stay his attack, but she bought the chav a few seconds before Toby lent both hands to the same task. Cassie was aware of someone behind her, and began to hunch and shield her head, before feeling herself being bodily lifted from the ground, and when next she had her feet she saw Chris taking her place at the dog. Together he and his brother disengaged Cole, and at last his victim was able to scramble to safety. He was yelling obscenities, which was a good sign.

Susannah was helping Lucas to his feet. His hand was bleeding heavily, and Cassie could tell from the way he was holding it up and looking past it that he was trying to see how bad the injury was. Her heart surged: she knew he abhorred making it obvious when he badly wanted to see something. How awful it must be not to be able to look at your own wounds, was her first thought.

Later, in the emergency waiting room at the Royal Edinburgh Hospital, Cassie found the sequence repeating over and again in her mind; the domino effect of all these people (and a dog) demonstrating their allegiances to one another and protecting each other's good names and persons. The chav's imprudent and inaccurate employment of the word 'wop,' and the remarkable effect it had had on everyone's hands: Justin's hand raised to shove, Rex's hand raised to strike, Lucas's hand raised to

ward, the chav's hands raised to push, Lucas's hand in the glass, everyone's hands thrown out reflexively and ineffectually to break his fall, and Cole's limbs extending from his body like fingers from a closed white fist, and then the teeth, and the blood.

Her contribution to the chain, and the fact that she was taken into consideration, was something that sparked in her a strange quickening of the blood each time the looped memory arrived back at this part: her struggle with Cole, and Chris picking her up and putting her out of harm's way. She could not forget how little her weight had been to him.

Justin was outside with Cole in the car, and Chris and Toby had stayed with him in case the chav's companions came back with more chavs or a pit bull. The injured chav had entered the hospital with them, all but side by side.

It was Cassie and Susannah who had accompanied Lucas into the hospital. They were seated next to each other, with Danny on Susannah's other side.

The two girls exchanged a glance, inadvertently – they were not sharing a thought, but looking to see what the other was thinking. Cassie realised they were both beyond the point of caring if it was obvious that this was what they are doing, and neither looked away immediately, as they might have on any other day, in any other circumstances. They were two feet from each other, separated by the chair that had been occupied by Lucas.

There in the Emergency waiting room, with this moment's bald intrusion freely, if silently, aired, Cassie felt herself suddenly wearied beyond all reckoning by the entire dismal game. It was beneath her. And if not, it was beneath Lucas. He would not wish to be the cause of disharmony between two people he cared for simply because they both cared for him.

She wanted to say to Susannah, you can have him, I won't stand in your way. But what came out was: 'Why don't you like me?'

Susannah took a moment to answer. 'Because you act like you're better than everyone else.' She paused. 'Why don't you like me?'

Cassie considered, nodded. 'The same reason.'

These were the only words they had exchanged during the half hour since Lucas had been called. And yet, for all that, the silence that followed now might have been called companionable. The straightforwardness of it was like spring water after months of bilge. And even so, what she had said was far from the whole truth.

A doctor emerged and both of them sat up. It did not bode well that he came out alone. But he headed off in another direction, and they relaxed back into their seats.

'I'm sorry about your father,' said Cassie. She wondered if her own father was here right now, on some other floor.

'Ta.' If she was surprised that Cassie knew about her father, she did not show it.

Perhaps another three minutes passed before Susannah said: 'I'm sorry about your boyfriend.'

Cassie was confused for a moment, until she realised that Susannah must be referring to Sam.

'Who told you about that?' she said.

'Justin did. Ages ago. When it happened. We were going out, then.'

'Oh. Right.'

Another doctor came out and they both sat up again. Behind him came not Lucas, but the injured chav, with bandages on both his hands.

The chav neither slowed down nor sped up as he approached, but his eyes never left them. As he passed their seats, he lifted his more elaborately bandaged hand toward them, palm upraised, in a gesture that managed to serve both as a display of the damage that had been done him, and a warning that there would be consequences. The movement of his arm was deliberate, unhurried, and strangely formal. It gave Cassie a sick feeling.

Susannah had risen to her feet, and Cassie looked up, expecting her to yell abuse after him. But she was looking in the other direction. 'Doctor,' she called after the white-coated form disappearing back towards the automatic door the pair had come through. 'Do you have any news on Lucas Carmichael?'

'Hmm?'

'They came in together.' She pointed to the departing chav.

'The blind lad?'

'Partially sighted,' said Cassie and Susannah together.

'You'll have to wait for Dr. Quail.'

'Thank you.'

She sat down again. A few more minutes passed in silence, and then Cassie saw again the curtain of red hair swing as Susannah turned to face her. 'I have something I've been meaning to say to you,' she said.

'What's that?' said Cassie.

'You can have him. He's all yours. I'm not in your way at all, in case you've been wondering. I'm not actually interested in him anymore.' It sounded like a confession.

'I... didn't...think...' said Cassie. Which she thought was a lie, but which was actually the truth.

'Yes you did. You must have. I made sure of it,' said Susannah. 'But if you've been holding back, or waiting, because of it, you needn't. We really are finished with each other. We have been for years.'

'Finished?' said Cassie, then realised, with a sinking heart, that Susannah was talking about Justin.

'He knows we are,' said Susannah. 'So don't let it stop you.'

'Thanks for the thought,' said Cassie, as expressionlessly as she could. Better to leave it at that, for now. Let Susannah believe what she liked. Cassie thought she could see Lucas coming down the passage.

He was pale, but otherwise he showed no outward signs of ill effect, aside from the spanking white bandage on his hand.

'Six stitches,' he said. 'And a tetanus shot. I'll be fine. It wasn't as bad as it looked.'

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At the red light in Clark Street, Susannah's Volkswagen drew level with the Station Wagon.

Cassie was aware of her presence for some fifteen seconds before Susannah noticed them, and she studied, curiously, the elegant snub-nosed profile, the hands gripping the steering wheel as if it might leap forward and attack her.

Why was Susannah not already halfway home? thought Cassie.

They had left the hospital together, she and Lucas and Susannah and Danny, and joined Justin and the Carmichaels where they were waiting with Cole by Chris's van. But Susannah had not stayed to take part in the recapitulation of recent events that had immediately ensued when all the members of their party were reunited. She had asked Chris to take Danny back up to the farm for her, said her goodbyes, and left, strangely subdued in bearing. Everyone else's blood was still up, Cassie's included, and the mood grim.

As they recalibrated from the immediacy of confrontation to a considered, fifth-gear setting suitable for vendetta, they had fallen to a more exacting dissection of the course of events in the bar. Rex, everyone agreed morosely, had undeniably thrown the first blow, but the chav had been the first to get physical.

'It's their word against ours,' said Chris, looking over to the little patch of tarmac occupied until recently by their enemies.

Cassie learned that the injured chav's lackeys had loitered at the other end of the parking lot, smoking endlessly and staring with empty malevolence at the other party while they waited for the return of their ring-leader. It was, Chris said, as if their motherboard had been removed: they could not think of anything to do in his absence. Cassie told him in turn about the threatening gesture the ring-leader had made in the waiting room.

'There you go,' said Toby to Chris. 'Threats.'

'He didn't say anything, though?' said Chris.

'No.'

'You can't call it a threat, then, can you?' said Chris to Toby.

Toby and Chris had been disagreeing on the subject of whether or not to press charges. Chris seemed to think it was better to leave well enough alone, and hope that the chavs had a bad enough relationship with the police that they would decide to do the same. All else aside, he said, bringing the matter to the attention of the authorities might well endanger Cole's life.

'And if Luke can't perform next month?' said Toby. 'Doesn't he deserve compensation?'

'Those lads don't have money, Toby,' said Lucas. 'Besides, I did ask Dr. Quail if I would be able to play piano.'

'And?'

Lucas smiled. 'He said he'd heard that one before and he wasn't falling for it twice.'

Cassie, who had not yet thought this far, was stunned by the brave face Lucas was putting on, and almost offended by his lack of spite. If his career had been compromised, she thought, she would happily hunt down that idiot and kill him herself.

'What about the audition?' said Rex under his breath. It had been decided that it was better if Rex remained incognito, but Lucas and Justin were due in London on the sixteenth, only five days from now.

'I'll have to see, Rex.'

With nothing much more to be done or said about it at present, they had parted ways.

Justin's mood as he drove them home was fractious, and his expression seemed somehow too sulky to be explained by mere wrath. A flood of invective was hurled at the learner driver in front of them. It took Cassie some time and several indirect hits before she gleaned that all this was because he felt he had given a poor account of himself in the fight.

Hazarding that the best way to commiserate was to be thoroughly dismissive, she rebuked him for thinking like a cave man. Her own words rang unnecessarily savage in her head, and he sank blackly into himself, ignoring her. They were all, she supposed, fated to be on edge for some hours to come.

Cassie's own emotions had long since settled into an interminable, self-defeating, self-propagating cycle, like an endless game of paper-rock-scissors: thoughts and instincts endlessly birthing and curbing one another. The cycle had been conceived not in the barfight, but in a moment afterwards, on the set of stairs leading down from the emergency wing to the parking lot.

As they had left the hospital, Susannah on one side of Lucas, Cassie on the other, and Danny dawdling behind, only one word had been said by any of them. The word was 'eight,' and it had been said by Susannah.

Susannah had walked beside Lucas, not touching him lest she should seem as if she were helping him, but helping him nonetheless, in exactly the way and to exactly the extent that he needed: by saying the word 'eight.' She had said it softly, but Cassie heard it clearly.

Lucas had nodded, and Cassie tried to figure out what she meant. Casting about for clues, she had at last happened upon the answer, right beneath her feet. Susannah had said it at the top of a staircase they were now halfway down. Eight steps in shadow. There was no handrail, and Cole was not there to aid him.

Susannah knew she had this standing with him: that she could say this much without offending him, given the circumstances, and that someone else saying the same – Cassie, for instance – might have.

Susannah had thought of all of this, and she, Cassie, had not.

'Hey,' said Justin. 'It's Susie.' He honked, and raised a hand. Susannah looked across, frowning delicately at the rude intrusion into her thoughts, then, seeing who it was, she quickly composed her features and smiled.

'I wonder why she's still in the neighbourhood,' said Justin.

Cassie looked the other way. The light turned green. She imagined Susannah sitting in her car, trying to get herself together. Perhaps, she thought, crying.

In those fifteen seconds she had not known she was being watched, Susannah's profile in the Volkswagen had given her the impression of a girl not so much thinking as held to ransom by her thoughts. Paper-rock-scissors.

At their flat in Morningside, the message light on the answering machine was blinking. The message was from Inneke de Villiers. She wanted to know if Cassie had heard from Mia at all lately.

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'I said I'd come to London with you and check up on her,' Cassie said to Justin. 'Make sure she's all right. And, I suppose, try and do something about it if she isn't.'

Justin had repaired to his room as soon as they were home. She found him beating the living daylights out of some poor defenceless orc tribe and listening to Sublime.

According to Inneke, Mia wasn't answering her emails or either of her phones. She could not be found at work, either.

'What about Helena?' Cassie had asked.

'Helena's left the UK.'

'Oh. Right. Have you tried her boyfriend?

'I got his flatmate. He says they've split up.'

'Ah.'

'When last were you in touch with her?' said Inneke.

'May 14<sup>th</sup>.' That was easy. It had been Cassie's birthday.

'Did she sound all right to you?'

'Yes, she sounded fine. I think. She was working very hard.' Mia had landed some plum of a commission. It had, in fact, sounded almost too good to be true. Cassie remembered wondering, for a disloyal and irrational moment, whether Mia was simply making it up.

The project was finished now, Inneke had told her. And something was wrong, she was sure of it. Inneke had been worried about Mia ever since they spoke on Katrina's birthday. There was, she said, just something off about the whole conversation. Helena had also been worried. And now, Mia couldn't be hailed.

Cassie had told Inneke that since her brother was going to London in a few days anyway, it would be no trouble to stop in Tooting and check up on Mia. She could hear from the relief in her voice that Inneke had been working her way up to asking Cassie to do just that.

Justin moved his head slowly from side to side, his eyes buried in the screen. Cassie knew the headshake was not, in itself, a demurral. But she didn't understand how he could conceivably need to give it much thought.

'Something wrong?' she said. 'You don't want me to come along?'

'No, it's not that. I was thinking of cancelling altogether, actually,' he said.

'Cancelling? The audition? But why? Is it because of Lucas's hand?'

'There's that. Other things. Various reasons.'

'*Various reasons?*'

'I just don't know if we're going to go on with it anymore.'

'What?' said Cassie. 'You, mean, the whole band? But why?'

'Well, firstly, Rex has got contractual obligations.'

'You knew that before,' said Cassie. 'He'll be released from them next year.'

'Secondly, Lucas is going to be very busy from September.'

Cassie had no immediate answer to this. She remained in his doorway, thinking furiously.

'Cass, I'm ten kinds of tired. Can we talk about this tomorrow?' He unpaused his game. 'You know what the problem is with *Warcraft III*?' he said. 'The Human Mage is far too powerful. It throws the whole game out of balance.'

'So you've said.' She wondered, unhappily, if her father had been right about Justin. His enthusiasm, the thing that had driven them from the start, was waning before her eyes, even as success meandered into arm's reach. He was like a kid jumping in his own sandcastle. Perhaps he truly didn't have the determination to see anything through. 'You give up easily,' she said.

'I'm not giving up. I've just been thinking it over. I've been thinking, next year's going to be busy for me, too. I don't think it's a good idea to divide my energies. Again.'

'Divide them? Between what?'

'My degree, and the band.'

'You're going back?'

'I think it's the right thing to do. I'm lucky to be getting a second shot. And I know I can do well. Or better, at least. Like Lucas was saying about his music, I feel I owe it to myself.'

Lucas says, Lucas thinks. 'What about Rex?' said Cassie.

'What about Rex?' There was a suspicion of preparation to be annoyed in his tone; the vocal equivalent of five o'clock shadow. They had both had a long day. She heard it yet continued.

'What will he do?'

'Whatever he likes, I should imagine.'

'It leaves him twisting a bit, don't you think? He's as good as thrown in his lot with you.'

Justin died. He swore, paused the game, and turned to her. 'Cass, if you don't mind my saying so –'

'I was just asking.'

'Even so, I have to say this – you're becoming an awful busybody. It's a good thing, in part, I can see *that* – how it's healthy for *you* – don't think I don't remember how you were before. But you must realise, we were all banging along fine before you came along, and will continue to bang along fine after you leave.'

How far, if at all, he had considered that last clause, its impact, was hard to know. Cassie did not consider her step-brother a vindictive person, and was inclined to give him the benefit of the doubt. It had been an emotional day. Words were likely to be spoken out of turn. But that didn't stop it from stinging.

She was shocked once, at the beginning of his speech, by the fact that he *knew*. He *knew* that it constituted immense progress for her to be a busybody.

And then she was shocked again, for him to follow up with the gut shot – by pointing out her ephemerality in this picture, the first picture she had cared about featuring in for a long time. He was putting her in her place, or taking her out of his own. You are transient, a transient, don't forget it, he had reminded her. That you have managed to weave yourself into the fabric of *our* world, to add a thread of your own colour, is very well, but you will leave, and that thread will be ripped out, and the fabric will remain much the same.

'I know,' said Cassie. 'I'm just.'

She owed him her life, she knew, the one she was living now. The job she had, she had been given on his recommendation. The place she lived, she had moved into on his invitation. Her friends: his friends.

But this band, it had nothing to do with her. If there had been a role for her, it would have been manager, but Justin did that better than she would have believed possible, and all she was really managing was social politics, not business, and no one had asked her to do that. She had supposed up until now that she was, to some extent, an old hand at this; making coffee for jazz musicians. It had occurred to her once or twice that it might not actually ever have required that much skill to make coffee for jazz musicians, no matter how much she knew about Charlie Parker. But she had, until now, tried to avoid confronting the fact that when it came to the music itself, she simply didn't have access. As with Sam and his friends, who had become her friends, she didn't have access.

She couldn't even say the words 'he's talented' without feeling like a charlatan. Let alone 'he's a talented guitarist' or 'his style is original.' What did she know? 'He plays beautifully.' That was where she lived. That was anyone's province, the subjective. Any girl's.

The actor had been right.

'It's appreciated,' said Justin. Token, and yet, for all that, it had been, once. But she had overstepped her bounds. *Their* bounds.

Every group needed someone like Cassie, an insider yet an outsider, invited yet not included, someone who gets asked to take the photos but not to be in them. It allowed the others to recognise themselves as card-carrying members.

And there was always someone, like Susannah, who made it his or her job to let that person know their status.

'You know,' said Justin. 'Only a while ago, you were the one who was telling me to get my act together and go back to university.'

'That was before I realised how serious you were about it,' said Cassie. 'And how good you are at it. And what it means to you.' And what it means to me.

Justin sighed. 'The thing is,' he said, 'Lucas is about a hundred miles ahead of the rest of us. When it comes to this, I mean. The jazz. Maybe not just this. Maybe just in general. It's all right while it's for a laugh, or for old times' sake, but the fact of the matter is, we're hurting each other. Musically.'

'Hurting each other?'

'Compromising.' He shook his head. 'I shouldn't be playing jazz, let alone singing it. Susie can sing jazz like nobody's business, when she feels like it, which she did back then, and doesn't anymore. And that's why Cu Sith worked and this band won't. We were all on the same page. We played jazz blues then, anyway, and what Lucas wants to play now is jazz. His heart's over there now, in his own work. There's no coming back. You can tell. Do you know what I mean?'

Cassie knew what he meant.

'He doesn't really want to do it,' said Justin. 'He's doing his own thing now. He doesn't want to be in a band at all, not this kind of band. It's just that he can't say no to me. He never could. And I knew that, and I asked him anyway.'

Cassie processed what Justin had just said, and abruptly leapt to a conclusion. 'Is this Susannah's influence?' she said. 'Has she been putting these ideas in your head?'

'This hasn't got anything to do with Susannah,' said Justin, snapping at her at last. He was on the point of real anger now. 'For God's sake, Cassie, cut her some slack. You're obsessed. She's not the Devil.'

'I am not,' said Cassie, 'obsessed.'

Justin sat back in his chair, two fingers under his nose, two on his forehead, his thumb on his cheekbone, the other on his keyboard. He closed his eyes, breathed in and out, and opened them.

'Did anyone ever tell you what happened to Daniel?' he said. He gave the name its last syllable, for the sake of dignity, and Cassie could hear from his voice that he was telling her this for what he considered to be a good reason.

'No,' said Cassie. 'You know it's not the done thing to ask, up there.' She inclined her chin in the general direction not of Kilgry. 'I assumed he was born the way he is.'

'No.'

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On the night of August 15<sup>th</sup>, Cassie went alone up onto the roof of the Morningside tenement building.

The day the world broke faith with Susannah Shaeck was the day she came home from her grandmother's house with her brother, called her mother's name, and heard no reply. It was a Wednesday afternoon, and it was Danny who found his mother dead beneath ten inches of lukewarm water.

'That was when Danny stopped speaking,' Justin had said.

'How...' said Cassie. But she didn't know how. To her, this seemed like the most appropriate reaction to trauma beyond bearing that she had ever come across. *Unspeakable suffering*, she thought.

Five and a half years earlier, their father had been at home alone with the children, both children screaming, Susannah, eight, and Daniel, six months. John Shaeck had intended to give his daughter a hiding, but he had not intended to hurt Daniel. He had not, at that time, heard the term, Shaken Baby.

The Scottish legal system did know about the term. In Scotland, it was a term that had prison sentences attached to it.

'She's never forgiven her father, obviously,' Justin had said. 'She thinks it's his fault that her mother killed herself.'

'But Lucas went to see him,' said Cassie.

Justin nodded. 'Susannah was furious with him, to begin with. I think she eventually figured out that he did it as much for her as for the old man.'

Yes, Susannah was an attention seeker, he had said. Yes, she could be controlling, and inclined to power-play. But it was because she had had neither attention, nor control, nor power, for most of her childhood. Just a lot of tragedy.

The story had served the purpose he had hoped. But it also confirmed fears only half-acknowledged.

Shortly after midnight, Justin brought her a blanket.

'I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings,' he said. 'It's been great, really, that you've been so supportive.'

He was sorry he had hurt her feelings, but he took nothing back.

Cassie shrugged. 'I'm just a groupie.' She tried to smile.

'Nonsense. You didn't sleep with any of us.' He paused. '...Did you?'

She threw him a black look.

'There we go. So you're a fan. A band is nothing without fans. And you were our only fan, really, so we would be nothing without you.'

Supportive, thought Cassie. She felt parasitic.

It was not the band, nor the music itself. Nor even the talent. It was the passion.

She had long known she envied this creative passion, the lack of which she had begun to perceive, in varsity, as a flaw or a deficiency in her own makeup. But she had realised only recently that she not only envied it, but craved it; she was drawn to its presence in others. She was like a cow at a salt-lick, seeking to feed on that force, and to be near it and let it pass through and around her.

She had recognised it in Justin as she had recognised it in Sam, and in Sam's jamming buddies, in Felix, in Mia, even in Susannah.

Perhaps especially in Susannah, who not only possessed it, but attracted it. And perhaps she had been jealous of that too.

And perhaps she should cut Susannah a little slack.

Justin turned for the fire escape, assuming, both rightly and wrongly, that she desired solitude. 'We can go to London,' he said over his shoulder. 'I'll keep the appointment. I might as well. We'll go and find your friend. Besides, it will be nice to get out Edinburgh.'

'All right.'

He followed her gaze up to the sky. 'Look,' he said. 'A shooting star... and there's another!'

'It's the Perseids, Justin.'

'Oh.'

Wishes falling, wishes by the dozen, wishes to spare. On each shooting star Cassie made the same wish, and for once it wasn't just a regret. Not yet.

Cassie sat on a roof in Morningside, looking up as the sky fell and willing herself to pass over that brink, that verge, of selflessness, as she had willed herself once, twice, before. Overhead the meteors tore on regardless. She wondered if her father had remembered to watch.

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It was a less acknowledged part of Cassie's approach – the way she hefted and wielded the weapon that was her outer self, that she should think of her feelings for Lucas in terms first and foremost of how, and on what, they might be brought to bear. This had happened, this cathexis, now it must be managed. She had told Lucas about Sam. That, too, must be managed.

People do open up to him, Justin had said, and that, she had since realised, changed everything. It was galling, to think that Lucas probably, definitely, knew this about himself, had probably taken it in his stride when she started letting her mouth run. Far from feeling privileged, as she had, in her self-involvement, imagined he must, it had just been another run-of-the-mill consequence of his consummate approachability.

That her gift of grief should be one in any sort of series of anything was hard to bear.

And yet after all, how could she deny it, she clearly was 'people', she had after all spasmodically opened up to him.

She had hoped that he would tell her something of himself in return.

Instead, he had said, 'Cassie, it's not your fault that Sam was not strong enough to stand against you.'

'He was the bravest person I ever met,' said Cassie, outraged.

'That's not the same thing as being strong.'

How did he feel about her? Did he pity her? *He* kept himself close, he kept his own counsel. He was strong and full of fear, as Sam was brave and weak. A round, square table, a magician't. Your friendly neighbourhood confidante.

Cassie contemplating mutually exclusive predicates, a breathing exercise, a mantra, a defence mechanism against the need to confront the painful truth that, like her though he may, love her even, as he loved them all, she was not as precious to him as he was to her, no more precious than anyone else; no, no more than every eagle owl that fell.

She bargained, as she had bargained for hours already that night and weeks before that, but now the stakes were different, and she knew, at last, that she could not go through all that hard work again. Making him fall in love with her. Not again. Knowing what she knew about Susannah, she couldn't.

Two years gone by, and she had found a second golden family, the second firstborn golden boy, but older, both of them older, and – it had taken her a long time to admit – better suited to one another than she and Sam had ever been.

But there was Susannah, and Susannah loved him, and this she would not do twice, she would not be the usurper, the villain, the other woman, the ignoble horse, the Sloppy Second Beast, no, not twice.

*Does it get any easier*, he had asked her once.

It had not just been for the sake of something to say. He had asked her for Susannah, Cassie now realised, in anticipation of her future grief. In anticipation, perhaps, even of her future self-recrimination.

Over the last five hours Cassie had gradually become aware of the fact that she turned over in bed each time she changed tracks of thought, from Sam to Lucas and back, or changed tracks of thought each time she turned over, it was hard to say which came first.

She turned over now onto her back, where the third train of thought had settled some forty minutes ago. The ceiling was reserved for further deliberation on whether or not to wake Justin.

This was, of course, was how she had got to thinking about that night. Or perhaps it was the other way round, because, if she had not been thinking of that night, she would not have needed to wake Justin.

There was a sorrow welling in her throat and in the nerves on the skin of her stomach. When she lifted her hands their silhouettes before the window were unsteady. It was not even so much as an option when it first crossed her mind, the idea of actually waking Justin. She had just thought, I wish he were awake. She didn't even necessarily want to discuss any of it, she just wanted him to be awake, and perhaps to hear him talk, about something neutral, something that would make her laugh or feel irritable and tired, it didn't matter which. She would have liked to hear him sneeze. She willed him to need the bathroom.

Wake up, she thought.

Then, having wished it, and knowing she could make it so, it reified itself into a possibility, something she could now not avoid considering. Don't be daft, he's got a big day tomorrow, he needs his rest, she told herself. But he wouldn't mind. Would he? Or would he. He might snap at her and then she would feel even worse. She got out of bed, pulled a long-sleeved t-shirt over her boxers and bra and went through to the living room.

It was made easier by the fact that he was sleeping in a room without a door. The final and only intrusion would be the act of waking him; there was no barrier between them to deliberate over in its turn, separately.

If the door had been open, she would have woken him. If she had woken him, he would still be alive. And this was how she knew she could have saved him: whatever she decided to say to him that night, if she had succeeded in saying anything at all, she knew that she would have been able to push him through the morass of conflicting impulses that held him suspended in indecision. He had lived



his life this way ever since she had known him; *ad liberatum*, improvising within a structure dictated by someone else. Without too much effort, she could have rolled him into the fate of her choosing.

Oh, the ruinous compliance of Sam Loudon. It was easier for him to believe that things happened for a reason. It was useful to believe in a great design. It meant he didn't have to make one himself. And Cassie was a perfect solution, perfectly willing to take up the slack that became yet slacker in her care. She might have been manipulative, but he sank into that shape without protest. She had always known he was soft-hearted, he was pliable, easily swayed, easily led, vulnerable as well as available. For the space of those years she had avoided thinking of him as weak.

Manage me. Rule me. Remove options.

This was not, in the end, where her guilt lay.

He was on his side. Asleep he was all extremities, his hands and forearms cast in a heap beside his chest like discarded fishing tackle, the quilt, after an hour's wrestling match, now wreathing his hips and trailing off one end of the bed as if having died in an escape attempt. His face was pious. She was not sure if he was wearing anything: his legs (long, hairy, his long feet and long ankles in deadlock) were bare and so was his chest. He looked sculptural in the dark, ribs and clavicles and zygomatic arches carved from something organic, wood or ivory. Surely he wouldn't sleep naked in a room used by two other people?

'Justin,' she whispered experimentally.

'Confirm auto-destruct sequence,' muttered Justin, and began snoring tremendously.

If he didn't have underpants on she wouldn't wake him. There was too much chance of the quilt falling from him before he was quite awake, and no one wanted that happening. How was she going to find out if he had underpants on?

His head shifted towards the pillow, lifting his lip up in a snarl where it made contact with the slip and giving her a splendid moonlit view of his splendid teeth. Between the corner of his mouth and the pillow slip a gossamer strand of gob stood suspended.

She leaned low over him, screwed the blue eye shut and peered with the brown to see if there was a sign of underwear to be seen without moving the quilt. There was not. But that didn't prove anything. Tentatively she reached forward, took one furled quilt-edge in hand very carefully and –

'Wh-wh-wh-aaaahhh – Jeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeesus!' said Justin. Cassie started, but not half so badly as Justin was starting. He flailed wildly, winding the quilt around his calf muscle and anklings Cassie in the knee.

'I'm sorry, I'm sorry, go back to sleep,' said Cassie.

'What are you, why were you, what are you *doing*, Cassie?' said Justin.

'Oh,' said Cassie. 'No, I was just checking to see if you were wearing underpants.' (Which, it was now clear, he was.)

'Right. Wouldn't want there to be any lingering confusion on that score.'

'I, no, you see, I didn't want to wake you if you weren't.'

'Okay,' he nodded encouragingly, still willing – desperate, in fact – to give her the benefit of the doubt, 'and you wanted to wake me if I was, because...?'

'It's not easy to explain.'

'Could you give it a bash?'

'I just wanted to talk to you.'

'About.'

'I'm not sure.'

'Right.'

'I'm sorry. I'll let you get back to sleep.'

'Don't be absurd.'

'Can I sit down?'

Justin shielded himself with the quilt and boggled at her. Cassie sat. She tried to think how she could explain, in a way that would leave him marginally less traumatised, that she had woken him because she had been lying awake thinking about not having woken someone he had never met over a year earlier.

She took a deep breath. 'I think,' she said, 'that I may be in love with Lucas.'

'Oh,' said Justin. 'Is that all?'

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Kilgrey lay dew-drenched and crowded with birdsong beneath a sky well mackerelered, pink and pearl. It promised to be a glorious day. If Cassie had been in any other frame of mind, she might have been pleased to note that the dogs no longer barked at her when she approached the farmhouse.

'Is Lucas around?' she asked Jean Carmichael, whom she found tending the roses in the front garden.

'He was here an hour ago,' said Jean. 'He could be anywhere, now. Goodness, let me help you with that.' She took her son's computer from Cassie's arms. Cassie went back to the car for the monitor and together they went into the kitchen.

The PC had been the excuse; a flimsy one, and more for Cassie herself than anyone else. In reality, she had come to test those waters, correct that course, apply her will to this natural force. And perhaps, if she could muster the courage, do as Justin had suggested, and simply ask him.

They were leaving for London in three hours. Justin had last spoken to Lucas the day before, to get news on his hand and hear whether he would make the audition or not. Lucas had responded in the negative.

Still awake at five in the morning, Cassie had decided it could not wait until they came back. At six, while Justin was fast asleep, she took the Station Wagon and drove to the farmhouse.

'Is there a message?' said Lucas's mother.

'No, no message. Do you think he's still on the grounds?'

'There's no knowing.'

No knowing. There was no point in making an endless tour of the property; if it proved fruitless or even long it would only leave her feeling circumspect and powerless. There was little chance that he would be in or near any one of the freak pockets of Kilgrey territory in which there was cell phone reception, and neither was she. But she had seen Cole indoors – he had spared her a glance – which meant that Lucas was not out walking, and she thought that she would, at the very least, put her head in at the schoolhouse.

All? 'All?' Cassie had said to her step-brother.

'I had a sneaking suspicion that you might be desirous to have Iain by young Lynx-O,' he had answered.

'You knew?'

'I'm not a complete idiot.'

'Well then everyone else must be. You do realise that it's generally assumed round these parts that I am desirous to have Iain by you?'

'Heh,' said Justin, too tired to laugh. 'People gossip. You know that.'

'Hm.'

'So what's the problem? All you can do is wiggle your antennae and put out your tentacles and wait for the right moment to make the sign of the teaspoon, as it's been done for centuries.'

'Susannah is the problem.'

Cassie had only intended to tell Justin that she could not bring herself to come between Lucas and Susannah. That was where she started.

Justin had listened, not bothering to conceal the odd capacious yawn, while Cassie told him things she had avoided thinking about for almost five years.

'That wasn't very nice of you,' he said when she got to the end of her account.

'I know. That's why I don't want to do it again.'

'Again? You mean, Susannah? They're not together.'

'But she, she obviously, you know. Would like to be.'

'Uh, Cassie, trust me, don't worry about that,' said Justin.

'I do, though. Worry about it. I'm older now.'

'You've got the wrong end of the stick, Cass. Susie and Lucas don't think of each other that way.'

'There's things a girl can see that a guy can't, Justin.'

'And there are things that a guy who's been friends with them both for years can know that a girl fresh off the boat can't, Cassie.'

'Such as?'

'Such as. Such as the fact that they've been friends since they were kids.'

So were Mia and Sam, thought Cassie.

There was little activity in the schoolhouse, although she found John playing chess against himself. He was, he explained unbidden, playing from Spassky's position twenty moves into the fourteenth game of his last tournament against Fischer, in an effort to provide the Russian with a better account of himself.

'I don't suppose you know where Lucas is?' said Cassie.

'Lucas Carmichael?'

'Aye.' As if there were another.

'I think he's playing piano.'

Cassie glanced over to the demonstrably vacant piano in the assembly room. But John put a finger to his lips and then pointed up at the ceiling, not to show which direction Lucas was in, but to say, listen, and Cassie heard, very, very faintly, the sound of music. 'T'other one,' said John, putting himself in check. 'Shite.'

'Why would he have gone to all that trouble for her, trying to convince her to go and see her father, unless it was because he loves her?' Cassie had said to Justin.

'It *is* because he loves her, you muppet. That doesn't mean he is *in* love with her.'

She liked these words enough to play them back in her head. She wanted to believe him. But even if he was right about this much, this time she would not let that be enough.

'And what about Susannah?' she said. 'How do you know she's not in love with him?'

'Because she's been in love with *me* for years, for a start.'

'You know, Justin, just because someone writes a song about you which then gets played indefinitely –'

'Look. Cassie. Take my word for it, or don't. But if you're going to insist on gnawing your limbs off over it, not to mention rooting about in my bedclothes at unexpected hours of the night, why don't you rather just ask them yourself?'

Cassie had not thought of this.

It would be slightly awkward to go all the way to the chapel with no clear plan of what to say for herself when she arrived. But he would no doubt make it easy. Having come this far, she no longer had any desire to test or correct anything; she had analysed herself into such a fine misery during the

muddy tramp between the farmhouse and the schoolhouse that she now sought nothing more than a friendly conversation that involved no secrets, no risks, no burdens. And no questions.

As she approached the chapel, Cassie was thinking of the look on Susannah's face when Lucas had arrived home at the farm that night in April; how she had stood there, stricken, in the kitchen doorway. Was it possible that she had read it wrong? That Susannah had spent those seconds making the decision to forgive Lucas what she saw as his betrayal, for making peace with a man she despised and he could not? Had she now assumed too much where once before she had been careful to assume too little? It was possible.

Lucas had looked, Cassie had thought then, away from Susannah, but she now knew he had been looking at her, wanting badly enough to know where he stood with her to warrant this rare vulnerability. Perhaps it was this, his need for reassurance, that had prompted Susannah to cross the space and put her arms around him. Perhaps it was this and nothing more. It was possible.

But as she started up towards the chapel entrance, she abandoned conjecture, as first her mind, then her feet, were assumed by the sound emanating from inside it.

It was just enough for her to recognise, just enough for her to hum.

She walked, foot for foot, towards the music.

Here he is seated at the piano. Fond concentration. She doesn't know yet whether he knows she's in the room and, as taught, she waits until he has played the whole piece through. The left hand stiff and stumbling. It could break one's heart. It does break her heart. When he has finished playing, she cannot tear her ears away from those echoes. She cannot tear her eyes from him. The light falling on and around him, blue and green and gold, he looks like an archangel, Lucas Carmichael playing a nocturne at seven in the morning.

'You weren't supposed to hear it yet,' said Lucas. He did not turn his head from the keyboard.

'I'm... sorry.' She had never been less sorry in her life. 'How long have you known I was here?'

'Since the twelfth bar.'

It couldn't be a dream, because Cassie never remembered her dreams, and it couldn't be a miracle, because Cassie did not believe in miracles.

'It's not quite ready,' said Lucas. 'I was working on the wonder.'

She came closer, and stood, uncertain, beside him. He turned his face up, his eyes directed towards the stained glass nativity, and she knew he was looking at her out of the corner of his eye, as he so seldom looked at anything. For once he didn't know how she felt. And to show him, because she thought the configuration of multicoloured light in the space might hamper his vision, and because she hadn't the words, she laid one hand on his shoulder, and the other across his cheek. He leaned

his head into her palm. She opened her mouth to ask him what she had come to ask him, but instead discovered that she was kissing him, and that he had hooked a hand in the jungle of hair at the back of her neck and was kissing her back. And for once she stopped thinking.

Lucas Carmichael had not stopped thinking. He allowed himself this, allowed himself a further second of this. Then he took her shoulders and all his wisdom gently in both hands, and said her name.

Hollow dread at the tone of his voice as he spoke it, at the message there; that carefulness that accompanies the knowledge that one is on the point of causing necessary offence. Cassie couldn't believe it. She had known in those few moments that he meant it, every moment of it.

'Cassie, I'm not him.'

She was silent, her face still inches from his. He was looking at her now, which meant he was not looking at her. He could not meet her eye.

'I'm not him. I'm sorry. I'm not Sam.'

And slowly she curled her body away, so that his hands fell from her shoulders, and she turned and walked out of the chapel.

He did not come after her.

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Lucas did not come after Cassie as she went out of the chapel, and he still had not come after her by the time she got back in the Station Wagon, where she sat for five minutes, trying to gather her wits, trying to decide whether to go back or not, and waiting for him to come after her. He did not come.

Eventually, she started the engine, and drove back to Morningside, slowly past the fields that now lay cropped and golden, aware that her driving was compromised by her state of mind. She was, above all, astounded, as she remained astounded, not so much by his reaction, as by the fact that she had completely failed to anticipate it.

Already she wished she hadn't left. She considered calling him, and immediately rejected the idea. First, she would have to figure out what she was going to say.

And if she left it to him, she imagined, he would likely as not say nothing at all, make no reference, and of course, of course, there would be nothing to learn from his eyes; no clues, no cues.

Dammit, dammit, said Cassie, putting the kettle back in the fridge.

'Where have you been?' said Justin, coming into the kitchen.

Cassie turned round. 'Damn you, Silveira,' she said. 'I look like the Austrian flag and you look like an extra from the set of *Troy*.' She was burned where she hadn't put on sunscreen: on her shoulders and calves. Justin, pale through winter, had woken up gilded after one day in the sun.

'European genes are good for something,' he said, buttoning a flowing white shirt and checking his reflection in the mirror. His hair was like a flock of goats, his teeth were like a flock of sheep, his skin was like a flock of golden calves. Manatee looks and eyes like giblets, as Sam used to say.

Satisfied, he took the kettle out of the fridge, put it on the hob, and switched it on.

'Where on earth did you get that shirt?' said Cassie. 'The sixteenth century?'

'Why, what's wrong with it?' said Justin, looking down at himself.

'There's nothing wrong with it. But I mean, it's very billowy, isn't it?'

'It's the only long-sleeved shirt I own.'

'I might've guessed. At least do up another button, people will think you're a drug-lord,' said Cassie, doing it for him as she talked.

'Where were you?' said Justin again, smiling as he submitted to her ministrations.

'I went to see Lucas.'

'Oh, right.'

And because he didn't ask, because she loved this in him – he never asked – she said, 'I'll tell you in the car.'

It was Justin who had given Lucas the nocturne.

Cassie had guessed this even before she left the farm that morning, and now, as they set out to London, he confessed that it was indeed his doing. Having seen the envelope in Cassie's bag the day she had got lost in Kilgrey Forest, he had guessed her intention, and had followed through on it for her; scanning the pages and sending them to Lucas by email so that he could enlarge them and learn the piece in his own time.

'I'm sorry if I overstepped,' said Justin. 'It was supposed to be a surprise. We wanted to record it for you.'

'It was a nice thing to do,' said Cassie, trying to imagine how Lucas would have felt as he learned the piece. 'I must admit I had thought of asking him myself.'

'Why didn't you?' said Justin.

Cassie didn't answer.

'I suppose I can see how it might be complicated,' said Justin. 'Emotionally.' He had had a hell of a time finding the nocturne in her room. He wondered who exactly she was hiding it from.

'It is,' said Cassie, who had only recently begun to get an inkling of just how complicated it was. She began explaining what had happened that morning.

As Justin drove, and she talked, something inside Cassie was laughing. But it was not a laugh that reached her face, and if it had, it would have looked ugly. She was laughing at the fact that, all things

considered, she would have preferred it if it was Susannah that was the problem. Susannah was alive, and like any living thing, inherently a phenomenon in flux. If he had feelings for her, or if she had feelings for him, at least they were earthbound feelings, and might yet change. Or if not, she could reconcile herself to it, somehow, eventually. But this? This she could neither fight against, nor wait out, nor accept.

'Why did you run off, then?' said Justin. 'Why didn't you stay and talk to him about it?'

'Because. I don't know. I freaked out.'

'You freaked out.'

One reason she had left was because her pride was hurt. The timbre of his voice as he spoke her name, the measured gestures, his failure to follow her; all suggested to her that he had foreseen this possibility, and worse, that he had been dreading it. That he had been dreading it was, she felt, certain. Why he had been dreading it was less certain. There were two possibilities: he had been dreading it because it would mean hurting her, or he had been dreading it because he knew it would mean closing a door that he wanted open as much as she did.

But that was just one reason.

Cassie sighed. 'I was scared that he might be right.'

They entered the outskirts of London at two, and an hour later they were still crawling towards the East End.

'I'd forgotten how impossible London is to drive in,' said Justin. 'Should have taken the bloody train, strikes or no.'

'We can still make it. You know where it is, right?'

'Sort of.' They crawled forward three metres along Commercial Street. The cars ahead heaved and settled. The exhaust fumes shimmered slickly in the heat. 'So where shall we meet up?' said Justin.

'You said this friend of yours is in Tooting?'

'I thought I'd wait for you to finish, then we can go together.'

'If you like.'

She didn't want to see Mia alone. Not quite yet.

'Is she fit?' said Justin.

'Mia? She's generally acknowledged to have a certain unconventional fitness, yes.'

They crawled on to another red light. Cassie realised her arm was burning, and moved it out of the sun.

'It's not *that* girl, is it?' said Justin. 'The one you were telling me about?'

'It is,' said Cassie. 'That girl.'

'Oh, boy,' said Justin.

At last they made it off Whitechapel High Street.



'You did get it all sorted out, I take it,' said Justin.

'How do you mean, sorted out?' said Cassie, knowing perfectly well how he meant, sorted out.

'Apologised, fought, made up, whatever.'

'Well, no. Not really.'

'Oh,' said Justin. 'So when last did you talk to her about it?'

'I haven't,' said Cassie. 'Talked to her about it.'

'Ever?'

'We've never talked about it, no.'

'Hadn't you better talk about it sometime?'

'What for?'

'It's never too late to clear the air. Maybe you should just have it out, eh? You'll both feel better.'

'It was a long time ago. I don't see the point of dragging up ancient history.'

'Well, it's clearly still affecting you. How can you know it's not still affecting her?'

'We were all extremely close friends for years afterwards, Justin. We even lived together. It's really not something I need your opinion on.' She knew that saying this was her tiny and utterly ineffectual return for his having said that they were all banging along fine before she came along. Immediately she felt bad about it. She had, after all, woken him up in the middle of the night to solicit his opinion on the encore. 'Besides,' she said, in what she hoped was an conciliatory tone. 'It's not as if she was pining or anything. She had plenty of other guys afterwards.'

'But you said yourself, last night, she was mad for him. Some people react that way to getting their hearts broken. Spread themselves around.'

'Hm,' said Cassie, wishing he would drop it and considering saying so.

He cleared his throat. 'I did, for one.'

She cast about, frowning. 'After Mrs. McKenna?'

'No. After Susie,' he said, with embarrassment. 'Marianne was the last attempt of many.'

'Attempt?'

'To. You know. *Show* her.'

They were stuck on a roundabout. Justin cursed as he missed another gap.

'Show her what?' said Cassie.

'Show her that I was having ever so much more fun without her.'

'I don't think girls do that,' said Cassie firmly, hoping to bring the subject to a close.

'You don't think girls rebound?' said Justin.

'Not like that.' Cassie pretended the silence that followed was not loaded. 'She's got a lovely boyfriend now, anyway.'

The studio looked rather dilapidated from the outside. She saw Justin in, then, to pass the time, she wandered aimlessly around Whitechapel, her thoughts banking between the imminent prospect of seeing Mia again and the somewhat less imminent prospect of seeing Lucas again.

For once, wandering aimlessly came easily to her. She was hardly even aware of her surroundings.

Objectively, she could not deny that he *should* be right; that all the evidence suggested that she had transferred rather than developed feelings for him. It doesn't feel that way, she thought. Does it ever? she thought. How does one recognise a rebound?

To think of Lucas as something as ignominious as a 'rebound', to anyone, was ridiculous in itself, clearly. Right?

'Give it time,' Justin had said.

'I don't *have* time.' Her visa was expiring at the end of October.

'Well, give it thought, then.'

Cassie was giving it thought. No, she realised, or decided, as she passed a church, and thought again of the chapel. No, this was different. How could she possibly have transferred feelings when the feelings were of an entirely different order? Not just in a different place on the same scale, but on another scale altogether, in a different mode?

At about four, thirst drew her into a little Italian bistro, where a number of kittens were constantly being chased up the stairs by the staff. She had an iced coffee which turned out to be too bitter.

In the time since she had left Justin at the studio, Cassie had composed at least fourteen different variations of an email to Lucas in her head. This was how she would do it, she had decided. This was how she would put forward her case, in an email. It would have to be an email, because he couldn't read a letter, and it would have to be in writing, because she wasn't sure she would be able to say what she wanted to say to him in person.

She imagined Stephen Hawking Junior informing Lucas calmly and reasonably that it loved him for who *he* was, that he was wrong, that although it could completely understand how he might have come to this conclusion, it had not confused him with Sam.

*As wolves love lambs so lovers love their loves*, Socrates said in *Phaedrus*.

If this had been true of her once, it was true no longer.

Cassie had no desire to possess Lucas, or engulf him, or hoard him. Falling in love with Lucas had been, for her, a plummeting over that brink she could never quite cross before, the threshold of self-sacrifice. She had felt a mere responsibility to do what was best for Sam, which ran contrary to her desires, and went some way towards countermanding them. But not far enough. She had a genuine desire to do what was best for Lucas. Even if it meant losing him.

But especially if it didn't.

The view through the restaurant window revealed a malevolent-looking black building. The humidity made its dark surface look moist and malleable, like unset tar. Having learned from the waiter that it was an art gallery, Cassie thought she might wander around in there while she composed the fifteenth draft. There would be air-conditioning, she was sure. But before she had finished her drink, her phone beeped. It was a text from Justin: finished. She paid and headed back towards Whitechapel.

She saw him emerging, Prometheus in his awkward age, wearing the bandanna that he must have secreted about his person. 'Been shopping?' he said.

'Just odds and ends. Don't tell me you wore that bandanna throughout,' said Cassie.

'Ha ha ha! You'll never know!' said Justin. Then he shut his mouth abruptly. 'Did you hear something?'

'No.'

'Did that box just miaow?'

'Hmm?' It came again, needle-thin, piteous.

'What's in that box?'

'What box?'

'The one under your arm.'

'Oh! Yes.'

'Cassie. Have you got a cat in that box?'

'Yes.'

'Why have you got a cat in that box?'

'I got her in a restaurant. Look.' She opened the box. Inside there crouched a tiny white kitten with milky blue eyes, its paws and tail made ragged by some earlier encounter with moisture. Justin looked down, and up again. 'You don't like cats.'

'I like this cat.'

'What are you going to do with it?' he said suspiciously, as if she might answer that she was going to eat it. 'You're only here till November.'

'It's for Lucas, all right? It will keep him company in London.'

'Right.'

'I thought, to complete the set, you see? White dog, white horse, white cat.'

'It's a grey horse.'

'Oh shut up. Tell me, then. Are you going to be the next big thing?'

They began walking back to the car. 'Possibly the next small to medium thing. They said they like my voice, and they like our demo, but they're not sure about our direction. They say our sound is not commercial enough.'

'Not commercial *enough*?' said Cassie, who, like most people, had come to think of this word as inherently undesirable, but that was because she was not in sales.

Justin unlocked the Station Wagon, and Cassie and her plaintive box got in. They set off towards Tooting. 'He wants us to come in and have a proper audition, and brainstorm with one of the other producers who is unfortunately in India at the moment.'

'Hey! That's awesome. Isn't it?'

Justin rearranged his lips dismissively. 'Commercial schmommercial. I'm not selling out.'

'Are you nuts?' said Cassie. 'I mean, have you completely lost the plot?'

'I have a vision.'

'Justin, you've already abandoned one perfectly good career path to pursue a ridiculous pipe-dream. Now someone says to you, I'm going to make your ridiculous pipe-dream come true, if you'll compromise just a little, and you say, sorry, I'm not selling out?'

'I didn't actually say that, as such.'

'I'm very glad to hear it.' Cassie was wrestling with the A to Z.

'It's not my decision to make alone. But speaking of that, there's the other little problem.'

'Yes.'

'They couldn't help but notice that the rest of my band was not present.'

'Only natural, really. Oh. Turn down here, I think.'

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'He had a wound on his face. A big cut.'

She could not forget the bits of flesh hanging ragged; could not prevent herself from striving to depict that glisten. The face etched in her mind flowed into her hand and through the pencil and onto the cheap paper.

Mia had eschewed the identikit, telling the police, to initial consternation, and then grudging admiration, that she would get a better likeness if she just drew from memory.

*Magtig*, said the constable. *Kyk net hoe teken die meisie.*

*Hoe kon jy so mooi sien hoe lyk hy?* Said another.

*Dis volmaan*, said Mia.

Outside, someone whistling. Here inside, the buzz of a badly wired fluorescent light, and now and then, the contented glossolalia emanating from the police radios on their hips. The detective was reading a statement. Not hers, Cassie's.

'He said, 'run, Mia'?' said the detective, now looking at her statement again. 'Those were the victim's last words to you?'

'Yes.' *The victim.*

'Not 'the gun'?'

'What about the gun?' said Mia.

'Well she wasn't there,' said Mia. 'She was down at the dam.'

'So you ran away?'

'Yes.'

I am drawing the face of a dead man, she thought.

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It was once imagined that dream activity was a function of an evolved brain, but research indicates otherwise. The egg-laying platypus, with its primitive lissencephalic cerebral cortex, has the highest amount of REM sleep yet observed. By contrast, dolphins, one of the most highly evolved mammals, dream hardly at all.

As to why any animal dreams in the first place, no one really knows. One thing that all the science agrees on is that in human beings, dreams, whether we remember them or not, are necessary. When a sleeper is deprived of REM sleep for a few nights, he or she will make up for it as soon as allowed, by having more and longer REM cycles when sleep is no longer disrupted. Impaired memory function and

poor reasoning capabilities are among the documented effects of dream deprivation. Eventually, our brains falter in their ability to impose continuity on the sensory world, to take what is on the outside and put it on the inside in a way that makes sense.

In Mia's case, it resulted in surrender.

A bed-frame, a curtain-rail; this was all that was left now in this room. The rest, everything she had not taken to Matt's, was in boxes downstairs. Mia lay on the mattress that would soon be occupied by someone else, wearing an old cheesecloth hippie dress of Helena's. There was no linen; that was packed. There was nothing to do but wait.

It was not so hard as she had thought it might be; excising herself from her own life.

This was not what Mia had intended to do at first, but once the process was set in motion, she became aware that this was what she must do, or, at any rate, that this was what she was going to do, as one realises gradually when one is lost in a strange city.

She had resigned from Fillette Maddox Studio of the Healing Arts. Fillette had released her from her contract without questions. About the reasons for either of these things, neither of them said a word.

Mia came in one more time in person, to entrust into Fillette's keeping, as requested, the large photo envelope containing all the photos and negatives she had taken for the painting.

'I'll finish out my standing appointments, if you like,' Mia had said.

'I'd rather you didn't,' said Fillette.

It was the closest thing to a confrontation of the truth that passed between them.

Three weeks ago, she had left Matt.

She had taken only what she needed: her clothes and her music. She had nowhere to go but back to Tooting.

Mia crossed her arms over her body, and under the cheesecloth she ran her hands from her armpits down to her hips and back up again, staring at the ceiling of her room – her own room, her studio – wearing an expression which felt pensive from the inside of her face, but looked pugnacious from the outside. She breathed out with her eyes closed and imagined, involuntarily, that the breath had colour, white and brown. She imagined her centre was to be composed of soft, oily secrets, like truffles, or hatching moths, white and brown. Things she could know if she wanted to. Mia didn't want to.

Two weeks ago it had been Katrina's birthday. The phone-line had been disconnected, so Mia had phoned from a payphone. She had spoken to her mother first; said she was living with Matt. Her jaunty

tone sounded like carnival muzak in her ears, her mother-tongue felt like an interloper stumbling around in her mouth. She had never used this language to tell this kind of lie before.

'Has your phone been ringing off the hook since the opening?' said Inneke de Villiers.

Mia said there had been some interest. She had no idea if her phone was ringing off the hook. She kept it turned off.

'What are you doing with your time these days?' asked Inneke de Villiers.

Painting, Mia told her. Mostly just painting. She could tell that Helena had said something.

'When are you coming home?' said Inneke. 'Doesn't your visa expire soon?'

'I might be able to get it renewed,' said Mia. She could not go home. Not now. It was too late.

'Well, I'll go and fetch Katjie.'

Nineteen.

Katrina was at the age where she thought she ruled the world, and – let's face it, thought Mia – she did. She was beautiful, and had never yet put a foot wrong. And strangely it was her sister's voice, her little sister, just nineteen, it was Katrina's voice as fresh as cut flowers and brimming with a self-importance, her talk of Rag floats and committees, it was this voice that probed, for a moment, beneath her numbness. It was only there for a moment, the possibility of knowing how she had changed, but it shook her. 'Mia?' said Katrina. 'You there?'

'What were you saying?'

'I was saying, can you keep a secret?'

You just bet I can. 'What?'

'Do you remember Oliver Loudon? Ben's cousin?'

'Of course. Is he at UCT?'

'Ja. And we're sort of seeing each other.'

'Wow. No way.' Beautiful, blue-eyed, olive-skinned Oliver, and beautiful Katrina. They would make an invincible couple.

'Don't tell Ma. Yet.'

She took another bath, ate an entire jar of pasta sauce, cold from the jar, and went back to bed, this time to Helena's room.

She had packed, last, her photographs, taking them down from the wall in the kitchen one by one and considering each in its turn. Her mother came down. Her sisters came down. Matt came down. Cassie came down. Sam came down.

There was also a photo of Fillette on the wall: she had forgotten about it when she took the rest to the Studio. It was the study she had worked from in Fillette's absence.

This was where the real Fillette resided, she thought; in that glorious naked girl with her lively feet and her lovely head bent over Lewis Carroll, discovering that a mirror is something one can go *through*.

Mia was learning that there was something beneath individuated emotions such as anger, and sorrow, and shame, and guilt, and disappointment. It was a homogeneous pink-white sheet of negative feeling, the source of all, and this source was passed through a filter by the waking mind, and matched to the relevant experience, in such a way that what came out was something one could give a name; anger, sorrow, shame, guilt.

Mia was learning that it was the gradual capitulation to this polony emotion that caused one to stop caring about the differences. She was learning that it was this that people were referring to when they spoke of losing one's humanity: the process by which one stops bothering to differentiate one from the other, hurting and being hurt.

There were very few friends to lose touch with.

Melanie she had not spoken to since she left Fillette's employ. Chantal she had seen for the last time the day she had left work. Mia had watched her face carefully as she said goodbye. She couldn't bring herself to announce that she would not be coming back, and had no idea whether the news of her treachery had spread among the ranks or not.

'It's a pity you missed the Garden Party,' said Chantal. 'It was a good one this month.' She did not offer an invitation to the next.

As Mia did not think she would get another chance, she decided to inquire. 'I was never really sure why she invited me in the first place,' she said.

'Anne?' said Chantal.

'Yes. I only met her once, after all. Do you have any idea why she kept asking me?'

'Well,' said Chantal. 'she didn't.'

'She didn't?'

'I asked her if I could bring you along.'

'You asked her?'

'I asked her. She said it was fine with her. So I asked you.'

'Why did you ask her if I could come?'

'I thought you might enjoy it.' Chantal shrugged, making her hair tumble over itself on her shoulders. 'I got the feeling you were lonely,' she said.

At which moment Mia felt it all collapsing, and all that was left was her loneliness. She wasn't important at all. She wasn't special and different. She was nothing. Just another unidentifiable white speck in one big bland homogeneous lump. Polony. Someone non-polony people felt sorry for.

Sebastian had simply never called.



Her saliva was thick in her mouth, clinging to tongue and teeth. She had not yet cried. She could not pass beneath the skin of sleep.

The day she had come back from Angel, she found that someone had put a new *Inquisitor* through her mail slot. Inside, there was a follow up article to the last one she had seen.

**WHAT ABOUT FILLETTE???** It was titled.

They had used a photo from the night of the gallery opening: Victor helping her to her feet after she had fallen from the skywalk. She read only the caption.

*Property mogul Victor Adamus with Mia de Vos, a masseuse at the exclusive Knightsbridge day-spa owned by Fillette Maddox, pictured here at the disastrous opening of the Adamus Gallery in Old Street. Mr. Adamus was seen leaving Miss de Vos's house later that same night.*

Massage therapist, Mia said quietly.

There was also a photo of Fillette; a professional head-shot taken at the height of her career.

There was a belief Mia had come across that certain people could look into the eyes of a person in a photograph and know whether he or she was living or dead. Mia looked at the photo of Fillette, and quickly she threw the tabloid away.

Who would have put it through her mail slot? Victor himself? Odd that he had not included a note.

Victor, Mia had thought.

Victor didn't feel sorry for her. Victor wanted her. Wanted to assimilate her, but at least he wanted her.

Mia had kept her phone turned off since the last time they spoke, when she had asked him not to phone her again. She knew he had been watching her. He parked across the road, in a big black car, not the Bentley. When the doorbell rang, she did not answer.

Then she had gone to Angel, and for a while, escaped him. Now that she was back, he would come for her.

It's not to be sneezed at, she thought. It's not to be sneezed at. It would be a life.

Really, she should accept that Victor would take over. Taking over was what he did. How had she ever imagined she could bring an end to it by such ineffectual measures as telling him 'no'?

If it had not been for this, she might have found more strength to stand against him. She was too tired, too tired to find the will. He would come for her, eventually. Perhaps not quite a man, but nevertheless, a solution. And he, at least, would never leave.

The money, Victor would take care of it. The visa, Victor would take care of it. These boxes that stood packed and ready downstairs, with nowhere to go, he would take care of them.

The tarot paintings, she couldn't care less what happened to those. She had left them in Angel. But Victor would no doubt take care of that too. And he would take care of her. After a fashion.

It would be a kind of life.

And what would she be then? His mistress? His wife? Mrs. Mia Adamus, the wanton behickeyed child-bride of Dracula, the kept woman, Stockholmed into service until the end of time. Could she really, truly, all else aside, spend the rest of her days with someone named *Rudolph*?

It would be a life.

Or she could leave now, while there was still time. Run.

But she had nowhere to go.

On August 15<sup>th</sup>, the day her lease expired, Mia decided that she would phone Victor and tell him she was ready.

It was now the 20<sup>th</sup>. Mia had packed, but she had not yet called.

Mia was learning that the homogeneous sheet was actually a filter in itself; a buffer; a pinhole camera. Because what lay beneath that protective layer would kill one if one looked at it. It was also homogeneous, but it was not bland. It was Chaos. Carnage. A black hole. Negative space. It made her afraid to know it was there, because this torrid furious mass beneath, that she could sense now whenever she dared, this had a name, after all.

It could make you kill a man who had never wronged you for the sake of a gang tattoo. It could make you run from the chance to save your best friend, and leave him for dead on a mountain. It could make you tell him a lie, and then forget you had told it. For a while.

Victor had, after all, been wrong: it was not power that was the ultimate motivator.

Mia was learning that the amount of pure fear contained in one human being could sustain an army for a year; that if you laid the pure fear inside one human being out end to end, it could circle the world seven times, that if you played the pure fear inside a human heart backwards, you would hear love.

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'Why don't you come too?'

'To England?'

'Next year. Think; the three of us, it would be a blast.'

'Four, if you count Helena.' They were silent for a moment, listening to the waves.

'Pity we're too late for the cave,' said Sam.

Sam. He understood nothing. It meant nothing to him to bring it up. It never occurred to him that it would kill her to hear him say the words, 'pity we're too late for the cave.'

The tide had already come in, they could not go spelunking as they once had. What a pity. He never noticed that her heart was dislocating like the jaws of a reptile to accommodate more pain, while her face showed nothing and her lips said, pity.

Had he taken Cassie there, some time in the last three and a half years? He must have, surely. Perhaps they had been there together many times.

They were too late for the cave, so they sat up on the road above the beach on the hood of his Beamer, towels around their shoulders as the breeze came up, watching the sky turn from blue to gold to red to grey to blue to black.

Cassie had gone to Cape Town for the weekend. She had him to herself, for a change.

We'll spend the day together. You and me, he had said. Just like old times.

And like school-kids playing hookie, they had. They had spent the day together, just the two of them, and for a while, it had been just like old times, as he had said it would.

They had driven to Koeëlbaai to swim.

'It was Cassie's idea, wasn't it,' said Mia.

'Mia... '

'Wasn't it?'

'No,' said Sam. 'She never even knew I applied there.'

'Why did you apply there?'

'There are good schools.'

'But you've been accepted in San Francisco.'

'Well, ja.'

'Don't you really want to go there, more?'

'I can go to California anytime, really, with my folks there. I might as well experience two cultures as one.'

That was a Cassie soundbite, Mia had no doubt. 'It was Cassie's decision, though,' she persevered.

Sam shrugged. 'She has a way of getting what she wants.' He had said it fondly, but she leapt on it, oh yes she did, pulled it out of its smiley packaging.

'No, she has a way of getting what she wants out of *you*. Why do you let her push you around?  
What do *you* want?'

'I want us to be together. There's nothing wrong with doing it in England.'

There was a silence. Poor Sam Loudon, he was far too good at giving everyone the benefit of the doubt, including himself.

'But Sam, you really want to study in California, don't you? That's the truth. You want to study jazz.'

'Cassie can't go there. Not unless we get married.'

'And you don't want to do that.'

'Well, I don't know. Don't I?'

'Do you?'

'I have to tell you, Mee, I've been thinking about it.' He was grinning like an idiot at the mere thought. 'I mean, I know last year you said I should wait a while, and I guess you were right. But I've had another year now, and I'm, well, I'm sure.' He looked at her. 'I mean, I love her. What else do I need to know, really?'

Another silence. What else did he need to know, really? If Mia did not help him see the answer, no one would. It would be far too late by the time he discovered in himself a capacity for resentment.

'Are you sure she loves you?'

'Of course she loves me.'

'When last did she tell you she loved you?'

'She's not good with things like that. Saying things.'

'Well, she said something to me.'

'What did she say to you?'

Mia looked at the sea. 'You have to swear you won't tell her I told you.'

'Well, if it's a secret, then maybe you shouldn't.'

'I think you should know, Sam.'

His eyebrows rose and then dropped.

Say it quickly, then it will be done. 'She said she wasn't sure that she wanted to spend the rest of her life with you. That's all.'

'What? She said that?'

'Something like that,' said Mia.

'No, Mia. Not something like anything. *What did she say?*'

'She said... she might have said *'yet.'* She might have said she wasn't sure yet.'

'When was this?'

'I'm not sure. Last weekend.'

'Where?'

'At my house.'

'What were you talking about?'

'Just, you know.'

'I don't know, no.'

'I guess we were talking about you leaving and all.'

'What else did she say?'

'I don't know.'

The stars were coming out. As each wave broke before them a bolt of cold green fire shot along its length in either direction from the crest. Phosphorescence. Just like old times.

Poor Sam, he understood so little of the effect he had on other people. The past, after all, was in the past. It never occurred to him that they were ending where they had begun.

'Did she really say that?' said Sam. His voice was shaking; she was horribly afraid that he might cry, that he might get in the car immediately and drive to Cape Town and find her and ask her if it was true. But Mia guessed that he wouldn't. She knew him well. He would say nothing, he would wait.

'Yes.'

\*\*\*

It was not quite sunset, but it was dark in that quarter of the house where Mia lay when she heard an engine stop outside, and then the doorbell rang.

She rose from her bed, presuming from the sudden precariousness of the ceiling above her that Victor had at last come for her. It could only be he, or the wino that still came looking for handouts every other week, even though Helena and her soft heart had gone to the East long ago.

Shapes moving behind the pebbled glass of the rose window. She peered through the curtain. Cassie was on her doorstep.

Mia opened the door. In came Cassie, followed by a black and golden god in a white shirt and a blue bandanna.

He was tremendous, and blazing, he was opening his mouth, wider and wider – he would swallow them all – his maw hovering wide in a grimace of intense pain or pleasure, then his eyes closed. *Woof! Harangue!* he commanded Mia, and if she had known how, she would have obeyed.

‘Bless you,’ said Cassie.

‘Thankee,’ said Justin, and snorted, and rubbed either elbow, knocking over a painting tremendously. No painting had ever been more knocked over. It would never fly again. ‘Hello,’ he said.

‘Cassie...’ said Mia.

‘Your mother is worried sick,’ said Cassie. ‘What’s in all these boxes?’ She frowned at Mia. ‘You look like a ghost.’

‘Who...’

‘This is Justin,’ said Cassie.

Of course it was. It was Justin. Like the rat. ‘You’re wearing my bandanna,’ said Mia. It was the first thing she thought of.

‘What is that godawful stuff?’ he said.

‘Sweet chestnut.’

She was ashamed of the state of the house, seeing it through eyes other than her own. It was not untidy – there was not really enough stuff left in it to eke out a mess – but it looked as if nobody lived there. A mess would have been better. There were not enough lights on, no sources of heat, no areas of activity. She herself must look to them like what she was; a squatter.

She offered them tea and was glad when they declined: she had no milk, and only one mug that was not packed. She stood in the kitchen with her hands folded and thought how different Cassie looked. Tuned to a higher pitch, but more energetic than nervous. She was there inside her body in a way she had not been the last time they parted ways.

As for Justin, Mia didn't know what to make of him. At first she thought he was appallingly arrogant, but mostly just because he was very good-looking, and didn't say much, and was pretentiously tall. Then she decided he was incredibly insecure, and briefly wondered if he was high. He worked awkwardly around objects, as if being indoors was new to him, and walked as if he had never worn shoes in his life before. So this was the man Cassie had chosen to follow Sam, she thought. Well. He certainly made an impression.

And here was Cassie, here was a window, a way out. She could go to Edinburgh. She could hang out with the band. She could go to Kilgry. The evenings would smell of hay. She would meet Rex and Susannah and Aaltje and Lucas and his trusty dog Cole. She could help, there might be horses, there would be cows, they would drink down milk thick and frothy from the udder that would leave zebra stripes down the inside of the empty glass. She would be safe there.

Cassie was looking down at the painting that had fallen. It was the painting of Bottom, the only one Mia had left behind when she went to Angel. Cassie looked up at Mia, her face blankly curious.

'Why have you painted a Butcher Boy?' she said.

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She looked different already, now that she had changed out of the loose garment - *raiment* - she had been wearing when they arrived. But the damage was done, and he could see her no other way but how he had first seen her, candlelit, her hair like a shoal of dark fishes down her back, her eyes like twilight bowers, fingerbruised leaves, so full of shadows and haunted light, emotions that you don't feel on earth, or are not named, depths and intensities he was aware of, or had guessed at, hoped for, *believed* in, but never himself experienced. Not quite. Not yet.

She was alone in the back of the car with the bulk of her luggage beside her, her legs on the seat, the little white kitten curled on her lap. She stared and stared out at the passing country, her eyes now in the last of the daylight like rooms with sunlight filtering in and reflected off many growing surfaces, and the skin of her face nearly translucent. It was possible to believe she had green blood. Xylem and phloem instead of veins and arteries.

'Take me with you,' she had said. 'Can I come with you?' She had sounded so scared.

This time she was staring at the back of Cassie's seat, and could not fail to notice him looking at her.

He wondered why she did not meet his eyes, and why she would ignore him, and then he realised she wasn't looking at anything at all.

'Crikey Moses,' said Justin, softly. 'I think she's asleep. She's sleeping with her eyes open.'

'Yes,' said Cassie, not taking her eyes off the road. 'She does that.'

'She's not blinking.' His eyes had begun watering empathetically.

'You think that's creepy, wait till you see her do it on her feet.'

'She sleepwalks?'

'And talks.'

Like an elf, thought Justin. Things fair and fell sat upon her brow, young was she and yet not so, and thought and knowledge were in her glance, as of one who has known many things that the years bring. And she was...so... *small*, for all that, and looked so... *small*, and, *fragile*, that he wanted to pick her up and wrap her in bubble-wrap.

It was true she was not tall, but then perhaps she was half-elfen. Perhaps she was half elf half hobbit, he thought, and patiently endured the resultant mental image of her hypothetical conception. Cassie had reminded him that they had met before, in a restaurant in Stellenbosch one December. 'Of course,' he had said, clinging with soft glee to the suggestions of preordination and covenant accommodated by the word *reunion*. It mattered little that he had no memory of the meeting. Ever-resourceful, his imagination had already sketched in a bleached-out image of a quiet girl in green seated finch-like across from him in the half-forgotten dimensions of De Cameron. He even managed to remember liking her.



His step-sister was sitting very straight in the driver's seat, wearing the Botox face Justin had learned boded ill.

'It's the only way to know she's asleep, the not blinking,' she said. 'You can close them for her if you like.'

'Won't she wake up?'

'Do it gently.'

He reached over and very gently, with his thumb and index finger, closed Mia's eyes.

III

LE BOUC ÉMISSAIRE

*When we meet again*

*Introduced as friends*

*Please don't let on that you knew me when I was hungry*

*And it was your world.*

- Bob Dylan

Cassie had this impression of Mia: that at the moment they arrived in Edinburgh she was being held together from the outside in. Like an insect, or a mollusc.

She had gathered that Mia wasn't working, and that she had broken up with Matt. She had said only that things had gone wrong.

Well. He lasted longer than most, had been Cassie's first thought. Her second thought was: why did he last longer than most?

They had installed her in Justin's room. She had offered to take the living-room bed, but Justin said he was there already by choice; that a girl needed a room to herself.

Mia had gone to sleep almost immediately.

The first thing Cassie did was to phone Inneke de Villiers and tell her that her daughter had been successfully retrieved.

'How does she look?' said Inneke. 'Is she all right?'

Cassie was torn between the desire to calm Inneke's worries and the desire to express her own. 'She's in one piece,' she said, deciding to avoid opinion altogether and stick to fact. 'She's asleep, now. Her stuff in Tooting was all packed, but she didn't seem to know where she intended on going. All she would say about any of it was that there was some sort of an accident. She fell from a bridge or something.'

'What? She was in an accident?'

'At the gallery opening where she did her big painting.'

'But that was months ago.'

'Yes,' said Cassie. 'I know.' It hadn't made much sense to Cassie either.

'There's something wrong, isn't there,' said Inneke.

So much for sticking to the facts. 'Yes,' said Cassie. 'I have a feeling there's something wrong.'

'Helena said she thought it had something to do with Sam.'

'Sam?' said Cassie. 'How?'

'I don't know,' said Inneke. 'Please, you have to convince her to come home.'

'I'll try,' said Cassie.

As soon as she had a private half hour of conscience free enough to indulge in worrying about Lucas, Cassie had phoned the farmhouse.

It was George Carmichael who answered. No, Lucas was not home. He had gone to Durham with Susie.

'Oh,' said Cassie, thinking it could only mean things had become critical for Susannah's father, and wondering if this was the kind of thing she could inquire about.

'Do you know when he's coming back?' she said.

'I'm not sure, lass,' said George Carmichael. 'I suppose it depends on how Mr. Shaeck is.'

'Ah. Is he actually going to stay until... is it...'

'No, I don't think he intends to wait it out until the end,' said George Carmichael.

Cassie felt bereft. During the trip home she had been keenly aware that every mile closer to Edinburgh was bringing her closer, not so much to him, but to more information. Soon, she had thought, she would find out what she must do next, based on what he did, what he said, how he didn't look at her, when they encountered one another. And one way or another, sooner or later, there would be an opportunity, and she would convince him that he was wrong. He must be.

'So phone his mobile,' said Justin, with his head under the living room bed.

'Are you nuts?' said Cassie. 'And say what?'

'Whatever it is you're obviously so dead set on saying to him that you can't sit still for ten minutes for trying to hold it in,' said Justin.

It was sometimes hard to believe that Justin had ever had a relationship with an actual real, live girl. 'There's nothing I want to say to him, specifically,' said Cassie, and for good measure, she added: 'you bampot.'

'Steady on,' said Justin.

Nothing that she wanted him to hear over a mobile phone, in a house containing his dying mentor and his dying mentor's estranged daughter, at any rate. 'I need to see him in person,' she finished.

Somewhere around the sixteenth imaginary draft, she had changed her mind about the email altogether. She wanted to be able to adapt according to his reactions.

'That might be days from now,' said Justin.

'Then I'll wait.'

'I hope you're not intending on bouncing off the walls non-stop while you do.'

She had relived the kiss a hundred times already, and a hundred times again in the short space of time since she had spoken to his father. She had changed only the ending: staying in the chapel instead of leaving, telling him with unruffled certainty that although it might seem very much as if she was confusing him with Sam, this was not in fact the case (she concentrated, particularly, on the unruffled certainty: it still irked her on a separate level that he had foreseen this eventuality, and she had not). Or simply kissing him again, and again, until his body registered the truth.

'What am I going to do with that bloody kitten?' she said to herself.

'I think this bloody kitten is deaf,' said Justin.

Justin was lying on the floor, attempting to bait the cat out from under the living room bed with a piece of sausage. 'White cats often are. Look.' He made loud *kss-kss* noises. Cassie went down on her knees next to him.

The kitten was curled in a tiny white ball on top of a piece of foam rubber. Its eyes were open, but it was looking in another direction, and offered no reaction even when he shouted.

'Kitten! Look here, kitten!'

'Maybe it's ignoring you,' said Cassie.

From the kitchen she heard snatches of Mia's conversation with her mother; heard Mia saying she was fine.

Mia did not seem fine to Cassie.

When it began to get dark, Cassie had woken Mia up and advised her to phone home. Mia said she would, but made no move to do so for so long that Cassie eventually dialled for her.

When she re-emerged from the kitchen, Mia bore the same wearily haunted look they had found her wearing when they arrived in Tooting, but Cassie thought she detected a redness around Mia's eyes. It was a start.

'Everything okay?' she said.

'Yeh.'

Mia went out onto the balcony to smoke. Cassie watched her, the small oxblood form and the trail of grey wisping up. Justin rose from the floor.

'I'm going to see if I can bum one,' he said.

'You don't smoke,' said Cassie

'I do, sometimes.'

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To fill the space that Mia was not taking up, Cassie talked.

She kept harking back, reminiscing compulsively. Invoking, referencing, laboriously assembling companies, congregations, armies of common acquaintances, shared experiences, as if these could take the place of a rapport in the here and now. Alone with Mia for the first time since London, Cassie realised how quickly Justin had fallen, or been nudged, into his role of mediator, buffer, a diversion.

They could talk easily enough when they were talking around him or across him. Their history flourished in his sight; alone, they were strangers.

The conversation was a hullabaloo of noise and misdirection, and it was all one-sided. Finally she gave up on talking at all.

Her eyes dropped to the hand which was stroking the white kitten. The hand was covered in felt-tipped pen. Mia had traced the veins on the back of her hand, dividing the skin into sections between the flexor tendons, and filled each section with glyphs and motifs of diabolical intricacy, all the way to the tips of her fingers and all the way up her wrist. Interlocking fishes and luck dragons disappeared into her sleeve.

She used to do that in lectures, Cassie thought. Or no, it had been just once, at least in Cassie's presence, in first year English, towards the end of the year, in the month after Cassie's portrait had been finished and it might have gone either way for them, friends or nodding acquaintances. Cassie had been sitting next to her, and for twenty minutes she had watched Mia illuminating one hand with the other. She had forgotten, now, which one of them had chosen to sit next to the other; who had been seated first.

*Do mine*, Cassie had mouthed, smiling, when Mia's own skin could not conceivably support a larger population of people, animals, and every species in between. She offered her hand, spread flat beside the page on which Mia had made hardly any notes. For the remainder of the lecture Cassie had sat experiencing a strangely profound sensory satisfaction, and every now and then she would glance across from her own notes to see Celtic knotting or an Eye of Ra emerge on her skin. A five-tailed fox with two pairs of wings.

She had gone on writing notes. It was her left hand, which meant she was sitting too Mia's right, which meant it must have been she who had chosen to sit next to Mia, as the rows in that theatre could only be entered from the right. And that had been the start of everything.

Cassie pushed Mia's sleeve up. The patterns went on past her elbow. 'Busy day?' she said.

'I met your friend Rex.'

'Oh, so he's back.'

'Not anymore. He left again. Does he live here?'

'Nominally. As of late.' Rex had acquired a temporary girlfriend from Boston during the first week of the festival, and was not home much.

'He said you were growing weed in the ceiling.'

'He was joking.'

It was the first day that she had left Mia alone to go to work. Cassie had given her a flat key, a Festival Guide, the latest *Three Weeks*, a fold-out map of Edinburgh, and recommendations on some productions from a reliable source (Aaltje).

'You can also drop in at the pub if you feel like it,' she had said. 'It's circled on the map.'

But Mia had not dropped in, and when Cassie had come home at five, Mia was still there, in her pyjamas, sitting on the living-room bed, paging through a *Kerrang!*, the white kitten asleep in her lap. No, she had not been out. Yes, she had eaten something.

'How long are you thinking of staying here?' Cassie asked.

'Am I in your way?' said Mia.

'Not at all. I'm just wondering what your plans are.'

Cassie sat down in a wicker chair. Mia was not in the way. She seemed hardly even there. But, quite apart from having promised Inneke that she would try and get her daughter home, Cassie did want to know if she would have her life to herself again before she, too, had to forsake it.

'When does your visa expire?'

'November.'

'What are you going to do until then?'

Mia didn't answer.

'Mia,' Cassie said. 'Why don't you just *go home*?'

'I will, eventually.'

When Mia had first arrived, Cassie had felt guarded, and monumentally possessive, not only of her friends, but of the streets, the views, the habits of the traffic. She was worried about Justin; had had to fight off the urge to warn him against her. She had not even mentioned Lucas. And most of all, she was possessive of herself.

Being in the constant presence of someone who had known her as she was before was like being forced to drag that former self around with her again. There was, or she perceived, an obligation to reinstitute discarded modes of speech, behaviour, reaction.

You're so different, Mia had said to her.

Really? she had responded, as if she did not know this to be so.

But as days passed, and Mia continued to remain little more than a ghost in the house, she at last turned her frayed attentions to the task of being a good friend to an old friend. Her best friend.

'Mee,' she said. 'Seriously. What's up?'

'I'm fine, Cassie.'

'You're not. What's going on? Did something happen in London?'

Mia said nothing.

'Was it a very bad break-up, with Matt?'

Mia nodded. 'Yep, it was pretty bad.'

'Is that what it is?'

'Yes,' said Mia. 'That's what it is.'

'Just a broken heart, then,' said Cassie, already knowing this was not the whole truth. 'Well, there are plenty of remedies for that.' She was behaving the way her mother had behaved when she had suffered one or another intolerably painful setback or disappointment as a child and young teenager, and now she did what her mother might have done in her place. She picked up the discarded Festival Guide, moved from the couch to sit beside Mia on the bed, and, opening the guide across her knee, she said, 'let's see if we can find something that will cheer you up.' She began flipping through the offerings.

'Thanks, Cass. But I'm not really in the right frame of mind,' said Mia.

'Well, you're not going to sit here all day and night, I'll tell you *that* for free.' And now it was her father's voice. Did she really have nothing else to fall back on? she wondered. Was she destined to shuttle between these two dog-eared playbooks in raising her own children? She found herself imagining what Lucas might say to Mia if he were here, wondered when he would be here, turned a few more pages, closed the guide with a huff of breath. 'It's the Edinburgh flipping Festival, Mia,' she said. 'Surely there's – '

'Go back,' said Mia.

'Sorry?'

'Go back to where you were.' She took the guide from Cassie's lap and looked for the page herself, flipping forward, back. 'Is this alphabetical?'

'There's an index at the back.'

'Oh, for goodness'...' Mia began flipping to the back of the magazine, but in the act she caught sight of the picture again and stopped, catching the page with a thumb. Cassie looked across.

'*A Midsummer Night's Dream*?' said Cassie. 'We've seen that one. It's rubbish.'

It was not really rubbish, but, having seen it with Eliska and Martin the week before, she didn't think it was the kind of thing that would cheer Mia up. It had made even Cassie feel uneasy. 'Where is this place?' said Mia. 'The Traverse, where is it?'

'Are you keen to see it?' said Cassie.

'I've seen it already,' said Mia. 'I know this guy.' She pointed to the photocopied Puck in the advertisement, who bore a very unpuckish expression of solemn ill-favour.

'Sebastian?' said Cassie. 'He's an arse.'

Mia was actually smiling enough to show her top teeth. 'You know Sebastian?' she said. 'How?'

'Just met him randomly. Is he a friend of yours?'

'He was my boss's brother.'

'Really?' said Cassie. 'Hectic.'

'I mean, he's still her brother, but she's no longer my boss.' The smile was gone. Mia read over the dates of the run scheduled in the guide. 'So he's still here,' she said.

'I suppose he is,' said Cassie.

'They're probably at the theatre right now,' said Mia.

'You want to go and see him?' said Cassie.



Mia was silent a moment. 'Perhaps some other time,' she said. She would go when Cassie was out.

\*\*\*

When Cassie met Sam, he had told her that he was involved with someone. He had not put it that way, though.

I'm sort of in a situation with someone, was how Sam had put it.

This was before their first official date, when he had taken her to Heuer, because their first official date had to wait until the situation was resolved. They didn't put it in those words either. What they had decided, what Sam had said, was, I hope it's okay with you if we take things slowly for now.

She had asked if it was serious, and Sam had frowned and said that it was complicated.

Cassie had frowned, seriously, and said she understood that situations could sometimes get complicated, and that taking it slowly for now was no problem.

They were eighteen.

It was noon, and the Royal Mile lay blazing like a banner at Cassie's feet. She traversed its hot length slowly, scanning the buskers and the groups of players punting their shows for a shifty looking person with dreads. All the man at the ticket office had told her was that the scalper had dreads, and he thought maybe a black t-shirt.

By rights it should have faded into something one could laugh over by now, years later, still friends, still best friends, it should have ended up as something one could laugh at, with compassion for their former selves, that they had taken themselves so seriously. But firstly, they had never talked about it, let alone laughed about it. And secondly, for Mia, it had been perfectly serious. Thirdly, Sam had unfortunately eliminated the possibility of their resolving it by getting shot in the head.

Sam had never named the other party in the complicated situation. For all she knew Mia still assumed she, Cassie, had never known there was a situation.

Cassie sighed. Suddenly every third person she saw seemed to have dreads. She sighed again, and breathed deeply, taking a moment to appreciate the sea breeze coming in off Leith.

Earlier, walking along Princes Street, she had noticed a crowd in and around the Virgin Megastore. When she drew closer, she saw a sign in the window saying that Radiohead was playing at the Meadows on the 1<sup>st</sup> of September; that Friday.

'Is it for real?' she asked the the door clerk. 'Radiohead?'

'It's for real,' he said. 'But we're sold out.'

Cassie looked beyond him to the milling crowds, and wondered why he didn't announce as much for their benefit. 'Do you know who else has stock?'

'Not sure, lass. Have you tried the kiosk in Rose Street?'

Cassie had not.

Friday, thought Cassie. She had a shift booked that evening; she would have to cancel it immediately. The manager would not be happy, but that was just too bad. At least she had never done it before.

She was tired of the guilt.

At first Cassie had thought she felt guilty because she resented Mia's presence. It dawned on her only by degrees that she resented Mia's presence because she felt guilty.

She had no idea what had happened, but she recognised one thing, viscerally, that she could understand all too well without any details. Mia was trapped in herself, as Cassie had been trapped in herself, and she was absolutely determined to remain trapped in herself, and would resist anyone who tried to release her. She did not know why, but Cassie was certain Inneke was right: it had something to do with Sam. Somehow.

'Sold out,' said the vendor in Rose Street.

'Crap.' Cassie stood for a couple of moments, as if waiting for an alternative to present itself. Magically, one did.

'There's a scalper on the Royal Mile,' said a man behind her. 'Or there was, ten minutes ago.'

And so she set off to look for the scalper.

Radiohead tickets, she thought. It was laughable, five years later, Radiohead tickets. I stole the love of your small life, but look! Radiohead tickets! How about that, eh? Your favourite band!

Perhaps it was not even her favourite band anymore. Who could say.

Over the past week, she had tried, sincerely, to talk Mia out from inside the skein of assumptions that held her mute, as she had talked Mia up out of her dreams when she wandered their house in the Slave Quarters in the middle of the night, asleep. But her responses were as empty as the dreamtalk had been. They were like cobwebs that fell apart in one's hands.

She would have liked to believe it was not her responsibility to do anything further than get Mia to think about packing it in and going home. But Justin's words in the car on the way to London had hit a nerve which Cassie had kept painstakingly deadened all these years. Why had Mia torn through men at Stellenbosch, or let them tear through her? Why had she finally settled on one man, a good man, after Sam died?

Why had she fallen apart now that he, too, had gone?

She stopped outside the Hogshead. Someone in dreads with a black t-shirt was squatting by a bag. Cassie went closer, but when the figure stood up, she saw it was Tanya.

'Hi.'

'Hi.'

'I don't suppose you've seen a scalper selling Radiohead tickets,' said Cassie.

'It's that bloke,' said Tanya, pointing to an empty spot next to a group of Australian zombies in kilts.

'Well. He was there. He can't have gone far. He tried to flog us some only five minutes ago.'

Cassie walked a bit further along, and finally spotted the scalper attempting to ply his trade to a group of Fit Asian Chicks. She bought tickets for herself, Mia and Justin at a monstrously inflated price.

A moment later she felt two large hands clamp down on her shoulders. She turned with a start to see Bruce's broad, sunburned face and broader chest behind her. 'God ye good morn, lassie,' he said. Rex was beside him. Cassie was pleased by his warm greeting; Tanya's distance had bothered her. But Tanya was Susannah's lieutenant, and Bruce was, well, a drummer.

'What are you guys all doing here?' said Cassie, smiling.

'We were doing a PA at Virgin,' said Rex.

'Without Susannah?' said Cassie.

'With Susannah. She's still there, signing CDs.'

'She's back?' So the crowds had not been there for Radiohead tickets.

'Has been since Monday. She said she needed to speak with you, actually.'

'To me? Why?'

'Dinna ken, lass. She said she needed to see you.'

Cassie ducked down The Advocate's Close, enjoying the minute's darkness and coolness, and wound her way to Waverley Bridge. As she crossed once more to Princes Street, she felt herself rarefied, distilled, in a mood of reckoning. She wanted to resolve everything, wanted to cleanse herself of everything still pending, open all the windows and doors and air herself. She would get in touch with her mother and offer a gracious apology for having judged her incorrectly. She would have it out with her father, a proper fight, she would shout if necessary, then they would make up. And she would force herself to come clean with Mia. Some time. Soon. Before Lucas came back.

Cassie retraced her steps to Virgin, and stood impatiently in the queue that had coagulated on the second level. The fans each had a copy of Vicious Spiral's latest studio album in hand, or at the least, a poster. Susannah was behind a table at the head of the queue, wearing a vintage bottle-green corduroy coat which complemented a green stone on her finger and the touch of green in her eyes. Her hair was in an unfussy plait. She offered the same smile to each of her fans as she signed their CDs, but when she looked up to see Cassie, the smile disappeared.

'Hello,' said Cassie. 'You're back.'

'Hello. I'm back, yes.'

She didn't know whether it would be polite to ask, but the only other thing she could think of saying was 'Why did you want to see me,' and Susannah had yet to give any indication that this was the case. So she said, 'how is your father?'

'Still alive,' said Susannah. Cassie recognised the sequinned tone, the expressionless face. I have to deal with it. I'm not going to make it easier for you.

She wondered if it was personal. Had Susannah decided to hate her all over again?

'So is Lucas back too?' said Cassie.

'No,' said Susannah. 'He's going straight on to London.'

'What? He's not coming back?'

'No.'

They looked at each other, Susannah's face upturned and her hazel eyes very clear. Cassie was lost for words.

The person behind her cleared his throat. Susannah turned a small frown on him. Then she stood up from the table and drew Cassie aside, to the window.

Cassie had thought, when she saw Susannah at the table, that the paleness and clearness of her skin and the schoolgirl plait made her look unusually young and vulnerable. Now, in the natural light coming through the shop window from outside, she realised it was more than that. Susannah had the inside-out look, the rawness, that she had seen in the faces of Sam's people, in her own face, two years earlier. The showy tone of her words could not hide it. Her borders had been breached. Cassie felt suddenly very insensitive to have come here ravening for information. But the next moment, she ravened all the more.

'He gave me something to give you,' said Susannah. 'A letter.'

'A letter? Why?' said Cassie.

'Because he's not coming back,' said Susannah. 'I'm afraid I don't have it with me. I'll bring it over some time.'

Cassie nodded. Susannah nodded back.

'I'll bring it soon,' she said.

'Thanks.'

There seemed to be nothing further to say, for the present. Cassie turned to leave.

'Cassie,' said Susannah.

'Yes?'

'There wasn't a computer around.'

Cassie attempted to see the significance of this, and failed.

'He dictated it to me.'

Cassie opened her mouth, closed it again, swiftly ran through her options.

She could find out right now what he had said, in summary; at the same time she could find out right now what Susannah knew, in summary, and something about what she thought of it. Depending on what he had said, and what Susannah thought of it, she could then decide whether to ask Susannah for further information on whatever information she provided; they would doubtless have talked about it, before or after, unless Susannah had showed breathtaking and unprecedented reserve.

However, Susannah would then know how urgent the matter was to her, which, depending on what Susannah thought of it, might put Cassie in an awkward position. Or she could wait until Susannah brought her the letter, find out then what he had said, in detail, what Susannah knew, and perhaps later still, what she thought of it. There was too much at stake. She would wait.

On the other hand! Why had Susannah told her in the first place that Lucas had dictated the letter to her? A confession, on the face of it, or not precisely, because there was no deceit involved, but an apology, in its way, for knowing something that was supposed to be private. But that was just on the face of it. There was also the possibility that Susannah wanted her to know that she, Susannah, knew something that Cassie didn't want her to know, or that she wanted Cassie to know that there was something in the letter, or about the letter, on which she wished to express an opinion, and that she was hoping that Cassie would now provide her with an opening to do so.

'Cassie,' said Susannah.

'Yes?'

'Do you love him?'

'Yes.'

Susannah looked her long in the face, her own expression unreadable. 'I think you'd better tell him that.'

\*\*\*

As she made her way down to number twenty-one, Morrissey Street, Mia looked around at the bright day, and, breathing in, smelled sea on the air. Surprised by this gift, she stopped in her tracks and simply inhaled great lungfuls of it, feeling an inexpressible sadness when the next breath yielded up nothing of kelp and salt, a leaping satisfaction when the fourth and fifth breaths delivered two gusts of the stuff so fresh they might as well have come in on stiff spray smacking her cheeks. *Die see!* What was it doing in Edinburgh? She had not seen it since looking down at it from 30 000 feet a year and a half, almost two years, earlier. She had not felt such uncomplicated joy in months.

The day before, she had surprised Sebastian at the Traverse. Surprised he had indeed been. But he had also looked prodigiously unthrilled, and she had wondered if he hated her.

'What,' he had said, 'are you doing here?'

'I'm visiting a friend. You know each other. Cassie Harris?'

He frowned, shook his head. His features had altered slightly in her memory since she had last seen him. But she had retained a default image of him shirtless and wearing his buckskins, and it was surreal to have her mental expectation otherwise so faithfully realised. They were going on in twenty minutes, and he was already in costume. Dane had allowed him to keep his hair dark this time round.

'She said you know each other,' Mia repeated dumbly. 'She's South African. One blue eye, one brown.' Cassie was always easy to describe.

'Ah, right. Intense girl, yes? Morbid crush on her brother?'

'Step-brother.' There was a pause. Was he making her suffer by pretending awkwardness, or was it really awkward between them? Had they become strangers so quickly? 'How are things?' she asked.

'Things are good,' he said. 'I got a gig at the Old Vic. I'm starting as soon as we finish up here.'

'Wow!' said Mia. 'How did you swing that?'

'I ran into the proprietor.'

Mia smiled, an old suspicion confirmed. 'So it was him, talking to Dane? At your play? With the dark glasses?'

'Him, yes,' said Sebastian. 'He was quite taken with my Robin Goodfellow.'

'I just bet he was.' They had both done some good networking that night, it seemed. 'What's the play called?'

'Tybalt the Cat,' said Sebastian.

'And what's your part?'

'Tybalt the Cat,' said Sebastian. At last he smiled.

'I'm so happy for you,' said Mia.

There was another pause, softer. He inclined his head toward her. 'You look awful, by the way.'

'Thank you,' said Mia, and meant it. Surely he wouldn't tell her she looked awful unless he intended to remain her friend. Surely, if he intended to reject her, he would not be toying with her good graces in his usual obnoxious way.

But then why hadn't he called?

'How is Matthew?' said Sebastian.

'I don't know,' said Mia. 'We split up.'

She thought it very unlike him to show an interest in anyone out of eyeshot, but when he nodded at her answer, she understood that this was what he had really been asking.

Bitsy came round the side of the theatre. She looked at Mia with some surprise, but did not greet her. 'Seb?' she said. 'I've been looking for you. Why do you never have your phone?'

Sebastian patted his buckskins. 'Puck has no pockets,' he said.

'Makeup,' said Bitsy. 'Now.'

'Yes, thank you.'

He turned back to Mia. 'Well,' he said. 'I have to go.'

'I'm sorry. I shouldn't have come along unannounced.'

'I'm glad you did.' He looked furious. 'Just bad timing. We're staying in Morrissey Street. Number twenty-one. I hope you'll come and visit.' She wasn't sure whether or not to believe him.

'When shall I come?'

'Anytime. This afternoon, or tomorrow.'

Mia's journey to Morrissey Street later that day was accomplished with the aid of directions refreshed at three corners by two helpful Scots and Peaseblossom, who she encountered coming the other way, and who was some seconds in placing her.

As she drew closer to number twenty-one, Mia began to have misgivings.

It was seeing Peaseblossom that had done it; the caution in his face as he told her where to go.

When she left London, she had had a story planned in her head, not for Cassie, specifically – if there was any hypothetical recipient, it was her mother – a story for whoever might be interested enough to ask what had happened, against the looming day on which she would return home covered in failure. She had quit at Fillette's because of incessant gossiping and nastiness amongst her colleagues. There had been plans for more work for Victor Adamus, but these had fallen through because Fillette had turned him against her after they parted on bad terms. She and Matt had broken up because he did not wish to commit to a long-distance relationship. She had imagined it so vividly that it had become a kind of alternative reality, with its own, self-contained order of truth value, in her mind.

But when Cassie had asked her about London, she had found she could not begin to muster the necessary resources to spin this tale. It was easier to say nothing at all.

Mia had told her only about the mural and the accident. It was all true, so far, and yet she found herself already exhausted merely by the effort it took to explain what a skywalk was. She could visit no part of this without being sucked back, mind and soul, into the whole.

And now she was walking, of her own free will, towards a house full of people who not only knew the true story, but had been instrumental in its construction. She steeled herself to see Jamie Lamington. She didn't even want to see Sebastian any more. There were questions of her own she dreaded asking, and she could not avoid finding out the answers if she proceeded now.

Number twenty-one revealed itself to be a large redbrick building with an echoey staircase, halfway up which she encountered Ginger.

'Mia!' said Ginger. 'What on Earth are you doing here?'

Mia turned around. She had been standing undecided on the first landing as Ginger came up from below.

'I'm staying with a friend,' said Mia. 'For the festival.'

'Gawd, last I heard you had some sort of a terrible accident, innit? In the Gallery?'

'Yeh,' said Mia. 'Wasn't too bad.'

'Did you hear what happened to that buggery little snot Jamie?'

'He's not here?' said Mia.

'No, he's back with his mum and dad. Turns out he was sending def frets to Rudolph Adamus. Who knows what his poor parents had to fork out to keep him from getting a criminal record.'

'It was him?' said Mia. 'The letters?'

'Yeh. He thought it would make Dane happy. Instead it got him thrown out of the company.' There was a pause, they smiled. Neither had the skill for this. Mia knew that it was almost definitely not the case that the gallery accident had been the last she had heard of Mia's doings. She was grateful to Ginger for the smile. 'How's the run going?' she said.

'Good. We had four stars in Three Weeks. We're well tired, though. Everyone in the house has come down with laryngitis. Dane went on last night with a temperature.'

'I'm sorry to hear it.'

'So you here to see Sebby, then?'

'Is he in?'

'I think he might be sleeping, but you can look. Hang on a minute and I'll open up for you.'

They went back up the stairway and Ginger unlocked for her. 'I have to run,' she said. 'It's the first door on the right, if he's not in the lounge.'



Mia walked into the flat, past three rows of mixed male and female underwear set to dry on the wall heater. She could hear a TV blaring, and put her head in the lounge to see Vianne and Lysander asleep on the two long couches. Across the hall, someone was in the shower, coughing.

Mia exited the room and knocked, softly, on the first door to the right.

'Who?' came a voice from inside. It might have been Sebastian's.

'It's Mia,' said Mia through the wood.

She waited a few seconds, and then Sebastian opened the door, his eyes stuffed with sleep. He was barefoot, but otherwise dressed. He raised his eyebrows at her and nodded backwards like someone who has been expecting the gas man for the last ten minutes.

'Did I wake you?' she said.

Sebastian nodded, yawning. 'No matter,' he said. He held the door open and stood aside for her to enter.

The curtains were drawn. All Mia noticed immediately was that in this half-light, his eyes were very nearly the same colour as her own. Then she remembered herself enough to read his expression, and was unnerved to see that his face was once again hard, almost brutal, even while it was still sleepy and pillow-rumpled, as if she had come home three hours past curfew. But the next moment the look was gone, and he smiled.

She decided to say something before he did. The worst was over already. She would not have it hanging between them a second time. They were at leisure, now, to talk it out. 'So I guess you get to say "I told you so,"' she said. This was the line she had imagined herself opening with when he called. But he had never called.

'Eh?' said Sebastian.

'That theory of yours?'

'Which one?'

'The one in which I screw up my own life and everyone else's because I'm an artist. Don't you remember?'

'Oh yes. Vaguely. I believe I was trying to get you to go to bed with me at the time.'

'Hm,' said Mia, at sea. If he didn't believe in it, it was harder for her to do so.

Mia sat down on the first of the three beds ranked side by side in the room. Sebastian remained on his feet.

'Do you guys smoke inside here?' said Mia. She was trembling a little now that she was alone with him, in the wake of that strange moment of naked ire, and in the presence of his potential sympathy.

'Out the window,' said Sebastian. 'In theory.'

Each lit a cigarette.

Clothing was strewn everywhere across the room, only one bed out of the three made. Mia tried to identify the other occupants by their debris. She thought she recognised a pair of shoes that belonged to Charles, if only by their size.

'Why *did* you do it?' said Sebastian, as if she had been joking.

'You tell me.'

'How should I know?' said Sebastian.

'For once, you mean, you don't have a pat answer?'

He appeared to consider this. 'No.'

She felt stripped of the only way she had to look at it that made sense. Why else would she have done it? The one thing that could destroy, in a moment's work, her credibility in her chosen career, her day-job, her romantic relationship, and one of her most valuable friendships? Two, if you counted Sebastian. But he didn't appear to be angry with her. Yet he had never called.

He paused. 'I'm not judging you.'

Of course he wasn't, thought Mia. Judging her would require taking a position. *The Freewheeler*, she thought, and then tossed the thought aside queasily. No more tarot cards.

'...But I mean, I have to say, I didn't see it coming. And I'm not pretending that I'm super perceptive or anything, or that I know you all *that* well, but... I'm around you quite a bit, and I've seen you two together more than most, and I suppose what I'm asking really is not so much *why* as *how*?'

'How?' said Mia. 'He came to my house. He looked at my art.'

'That's it?' said Sebastian. 'No groundwork? No build-up? He just looked at your art?'

She roved. 'He touched my hand.'

'He touched your – when?'

'The night we came to see your play.'

'A *Midsummer* –'

'Yes.'

Sebastian emptied his lungs through his nose and tossed his hands in the air. 'Great,' he said, the syllable coinciding plosively with the impact of his palms on his thighs. 'I clock in almost daily, pour my sweat and blood into winning your favour, and nothing. R.V.A. *touches your hand*, once, five months ago, and hey presto, home base. I don't get it. What does he have that –'

'Shut up!' said Mia loudly.

Keep it down, came a voice from the room opposite.

Sebastian shut up. She was barely holding herself together, the tension crackling like a Jacob's ladder across her skin.

There was a long silence. 'God, Mia, I am sorry,' he said. 'I sometimes forget that you're a real girl. I was only joking, really. I thought a bit of blokey joking might help you put the whole thing –'

'I never asked for your help,' said Mia. 'Or your advice. Or your opinion.'

'Yes you did. Just now.' He ran a hand through the hair at the back of his head, where it had grown longish once more and dark, then lifted it straight out towards the door as if signalling a right turn, and let it drop again.

And now she wondered if perhaps *this* was why he hadn't called. His pride was hurt. If she was going to cheat on Matt with anyone, it was supposed to be with him. He had, as he said, put in the hours. And why else would he have ignored her? Perhaps he really did like her. Perhaps he had been hurt. Perhaps she had hurt him.

She drew her legs up onto the bed, laid her temple on her knee and encircled her knees with her arms. She was not sure she could bear what must come next.

'What is it?' said Sebastian, with the intonation of a statement, as if she had been making a scene every day for the past year.

For an explanation, Mia said his sister's name. She did not manage to couch it in a question.

Sebastian said 'ah,' and paused. Finally he took the rest of her cigarette from her hand and threw it out the window, together with his own.

He sat down beside her and stroked her hair the wrong way, as if she were a spaniel. Mia said nothing. She could not look at him. 'There, now, it will be all right, Fillette will get over it,' he said. 'She's a tough cookie.'

Someone arrived noisily at the front door. Sebastian rose again and closed the bedroom door, then, on second thought, bolted it.

'What did you do that for?'

'That's Dane coming in now.'

'And?'

'Well,' said Sebastian. 'Do you *want* to see him?'

'No,' said Mia. 'I suppose I don't.'

She could hear Dane in the living-room, protesting as Bitsy tried to convince him to gargle with vinegar.

Then she thought, she had been a fool, she had not only walked right into a houseful of people who knew her, but a houseful of people who knew *him*, and she was here in this room with the one who had the closest ties of all with him. Her eyes widened. She put her feet back on the floor. 'Seb,' she said. 'You have to get me out of here. Is there another way out?'

'Why?'

'If word gets out in London that I'm here, he'll find me.'

'Victor?'

'He'll come after me.'

Sebastian frowned. 'What makes you think that?'

'I just know.'

'I don't think he will, Mia. He's not even in the country.'

'What?'

'He's gone off to Europe somewhere. Business trip.'

'Gone?' said Mia. He was *gone*? 'How do you know?'

'Because Fillette went with him.'

She was shocked, then, briefly, elated, then simply numb. He was gone. She had escaped him.

Was it possible? 'I thought, what did you mean when you said Fillette will get over him?'

'It,' said Sebastian. 'I said 'get over it.'

'They're back together?'

'Seems so.' He did not know how to respond to her expression. 'Trust me, I'm not thrilled about it either.'

Victor was gone. He wasn't looking for her. No one was chasing her, no one was waiting for her.

'Mia?'

Her shoulders were quaking a little, and she laughed once, and then stopped, her face collapsing for a moment into what looked like the beginning of tears, and then returned to its mask of nothing.

Sebastian sat down again. He rubbed the flat of his hand slowly across the piece of skin between the supra spinatae of her scapulae to just under the axis vertebra. Mia knew better than he why he did this: he had instinctively aimed for the area that in other mammals is called the scruff, where mothers without hands pick their young up; the square of skin that cries out for the rhythmic stroking action of a large parental tongue when one is in emotional distress. She found that the knowledge of why it worked did not diminish the comforting effect at all. It's okay, I'm here, the hand said, and her parasympathetic nervous system responded obediently.

'You know, Mia,' he said, with infinite gentleness, as if breaking hard news, 'At the end of the day, he is... just... a *developer*.'

She wasn't sure if he meant to convey only that Victor was beneath her, or himself, or both of them, in terms of vocation, or quality of mind, or if Sebastian could really somehow know how difficult it had become for her to think of Victor as 'just' anything. Just a property developer, she said to herself, and felt like laughing. Just a man. Just another man. She began snuffling jerkily as her long battened-down panic sought an outlet.

Poor Minnie Mouse. You are very small, said Sebastian. He put his other arm over the halo of her own as she hugged herself, and after a minute's breathing he began singing very softly, at the pace of a lullaby, *Who's the leader of the club that's made for you and me? M-I-N; N-I-E; M-O-U-S-E.*

Seb. She knew Seb. Seb was okay. She was not in love with him. Slowly, as if she were nodding off, she let her head drop against his chest. He lifted up the bottom of his black v-neck jersey and put it

over her head like a falconer's hood, cocooning her senses, and began rocking her to the paraphrased rhythm of the ditty Britney Spears and Justin Timberlake had warbled in their bright-eyed virginal youth. His t-shirt smelled pleasantly-unpleasantly of male sweat and the jersey smelled of fabric softener and she could hear his voice bouncing around in his thoracic cavity, Minnie Mouse, Minnie Mouse.

He was stroking her face through the jersey. His fingers found her eyes, and he began massaging her eyeballs through her lids.

Mia, who had thought she had rubbed every part of the human body that could be usefully rubbed, was intrigued to find that it was not at all unpleasant. She stayed there, unmoving, while his fingers began to explore her nostrils, then her lips, until it became impossible to breathe comfortably.

When her head emerged into the light, she found him looking down at her, and was again surprised to see the return of the hard, intent expression. At last she understood its meaning. She had misunderstood, or underestimated, the force of that look he had given her outside the Traverse. So *this* is what's going to happen now, she thought, as he reached his hand again toward her, and wrapped it around the back of her neck. She was three-quarters supine, and she noted with approval and relief the moment during which he dropped his hand and sat, passive, his body angled slightly away to allow her clear psychological passage past him, with a question on his face. Mia did not move.

In lieu of a nod, he blinked once, a catsmile, a Tybalt smile, and then he bowed his body, his arm crossing over her, and lay on top of her. The whole length of her was pinned, and he coupled his eyes to hers, a pillow-crease etched rakishly across one eye and cheekbone, like a pirate's scar. His eyes themselves were still hard and tempestuous – they had gone almost navy – so that she expected his mouth to be hard too. But when he kissed her it is with exquisite gentleness and skill, for a very long time, unhurriedly, and only on the mouth, his hands on either side of her head pinning her inadvertently by the hair, and his arms at right angles, sphinxlike, while his whole body crushed her softly into the bed and his eyes railed at her. He did not touch the rest of her body at all, nor relieve her of the burden of his own, only shifting once to accommodate his conversion to the apposite state. He kissed her with versatility, application, and ability. His lips, soft as an elf's, were turning flamingo pink, and she thought, is there any part of this man that does not change colour? Her hands had been resting in the small of his back, and only now did it dawn on her that they were not restrained. She tugged at his jersey and he took it off irritably; it was in the way. There was a stippling of small moles across his shoulders, a fact which delighted her only because she had never known it before, and because this made her wonder what else she was about to discover.

But first she wanted his eyes to lose their fury and go turquoise again, so she pressed her lizard-fingers into his lumbar muscles. Gradually he relaxed and his gaze became diffuse. At last he smiled, and began purring like a cat, so realistically that for a moment she started. Then she laughed. And he laughed, into her neck. There was a throaty rattle to it – he had caught the house laryngitis.

He moved his mouth to her neck, and subjected it to the same lengthy attentions, carefully, appraising, a sculptor correcting an imbalance, then to her ear, where speaking at last, he said, Sweetheart, what are the logistics here? She was satisfied with the way he asked, not Jack Russell-urgent nor ob-gyn-matter-of-fact, but sleepily, sighingly, a footnote, as if they had just woken up and he was asking her what she dreamed about. Taking her pace from him she moved slowly, and she spoke slowly when she said, it's fine, we don't need anything. He smiled again, lazily, the smile was right beside her eyes, and she reached to swallow it, glorious Robin Goodfellow.

Hmm, he sighed – he might almost have yawned it – and at last he got down to unfinished business, and began to help her out of her jeans.

Then she said, wait.

'Wait? What for?'

'I want to ask you something.'

'Yes?'

'What you said just now. About the sweat and blood. Did you mean it?'

'Did I mean what?'

'About trying to get me into bed. At the gallery, all those times you visited. All those lunches.'

'Well,' said Sebastian. 'Um. I mean, to be honest, yes. At least in the beginning, I was hoping for, you know, eventually.'

'Do you swear?'

'What?'

'Do you swear you were just trying to get me to sleep with you?'

'I, ah, Mia?' said Sebastian slowly. 'Is that a compliment in South Africa, or have you gone mad? Or have I?'

'Tell me you didn't come to the gallery *all those weeks* just to butter me up for Dane's little venture,' said Mia.

Sebastian groaned, collapsing his weight between his shoulder blades. 'It would seem that once-again the steel-toed boot of insecurity has flushed the rabbit of paranoia from the well-trimmed hedge-grow of reason,' he said.

'So you're saying you didn't.'

'I apologised for that, didn't I? It was his idea, and he only voiced it the day before I asked you. I had been talking about you rather a lot. It was all in the name of fun.'

'Swear it.'

'Mia,' said Sebastian solemnly, 'I swear I was only trying to get into your pants.'

He began to kiss her again. He liked her, he had wanted her, he was not angry with her, Fillette was a tough cookie. She was not in love with him.

'Wait.'

Sebastian sighed. This time it was almost a snort. 'Look,' he said, 'are we going to do this or not? I'd quite like to get some more sleep before I go on tonight. We're all going out in Cowgate after.'

'Why didn't you call me?'

'What would you have liked me to call you?' said Sebastian, still in that voice that was like sugar being folded into egg whites.

He wasn't going to answer, she realised. It was easier not to answer. It was easier not to ask. Mia asked anyway.

'If you weren't angry with me, why didn't you call me?'

Perhaps he simply didn't care either way; enough to cold-shoulder her, or enough to be angry with her, or disappointed in her. Certainly not enough to stand by her.

'It was a tricky situation, Minnie Mouse,' he said. 'After that article.'

'You saw that article?'

'Everyone saw that article, Mia.'

All those days that she was suspended in isolation in Tooting, Mia had assumed that Sebastian was spurning her for Fillette's sake. Now she realised this would have required resources of loyalty he was not encumbered by.

'Are you the one that put it through my mail slot?'

'Your mail slot? No. I've not yet been anywhere near your mail slot...'

She allowed her head to fall away, her body to cold-fish.

He looked at her in his mazarine gaze with his eyebrows knit. 'What *now*?' he said. He looked suddenly very like Fillette, in the photo with the boa constrictor. It had been months, she realised, since she had thought of them as even sharing a passing resemblance.

She had ceased to be entertaining after the gallery extravaganza. Her new status as an outcast was tiresome. It was not out of solidarity with Fillette that he had spurned her, it was out of solidarity – not even solidarity, nothing that pure – a desire to remain ingratiated, to Dane and his cohorts. The whole of the London artistic community, in fact, who saw her as the embodiment of everything for which they had such ostentatious contempt.

She was tiresome, while she had nothing else to offer him. But his entire life was organised around avoiding, deflecting, the fearsomely immanent prospect of boredom, and right now, she was the most entertaining thing in Edinburgh. Or at least, in the room.

He, too, was just another man. Just another man who had left her when that became the easiest thing to do. And she, just another woman. As long as they had that clear, why not.

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'Lucas?'

'Cassie.'

'Are you in London?'

'No, I'm still in Durham. Are you in London?'

'No, I'm back in Edinburgh. How, how is Mr. Shaech?'

'As well as can be expected. How was London?'

She gave him a brief account of Justin's meeting with the producer, which had, under the circumstances, gone well. During the meeting, which was more of an interview than an audition, and more of a competition than an interview, the two of them had, apparently, played best of three on an L-shaped pool table in order to determine whether the band deserved a second bash at showing up all at the same time. Justin had won.

She could not determine, as she spoke to Lucas and Lucas listened, whether she was right in thinking that it had been a loaded question.

'I was a little surprised to learn that you had gone along,' said Lucas.

'I had to go and find a friend of mine.'

'So Rex said. I came down to see you, but you were gone.'

'You came down?' She had missed him. He had come after her. It had taken him a while, but he had come after her. Why hadn't she waited longer for him? It's not too late, she told herself.

Cassie took a breath. 'I got your letter.'

Susannah had kept her promise: she had dropped it off later that same afternoon. Having read it, Cassie had at last decided that she could neither send Lucas an email nor wait to see him in person. Even if Mr. Shaech was not as well as could be expected, even if he was on his deathbed, even if Lucas was at this minute giving him mouth to mouth, she had to speak to him now. 'You're wrong.'

'I'm wrong?'

'Yes.'

That was not what she had wanted to say. She could not understand why he was giving her so little, why he kept his tone so neutral. 'I don't, I'm not, I'm not in love with Sam anymore.' It was said, the words were said. Over a mobile phone with a bad connection. And amazingly enough, the hard part was yet to come. 'I think you're wrong.'

There was a long moment during which she could hear nothing from his end of the line, and during which she imagined him rubbing the heel of his hand against his forehead, as he and his father both did when they were tired or worried. 'Why did you walk out on me?' he said.

'I'm not sure,' said Cassie. 'I think I was angry with you.' She was still angry with him, or angry again, now for a different reason. She did not forgive him, yet, for leaving without saying goodbye.

'Angry? Why?' And now *he* sounded angry. Better anger than nothing.



Perhaps, she thought, he had said those words to her in the chapel in the hope that she would immediately rebuff them. Perhaps he had merely been discharging what he felt was a duty. If so, he might have thought of a better way to do it. Or a better moment.

'I guess, because you made it sound as if you had been expecting this all along.'

"This?"

'Expecting me to form an attachment to you.' *Form an attachment.* Jesus. This was not what she had wanted to say, at all, any of it. It had all been so eloquent in the email.

"Form an attachment?"

'Lucas.' She had sunk now against the doorframe, her knees were to her chest and her forehead leaning against them. It was all in vain, he wasn't there. If she had only stayed, if he could only see her. He couldn't see her anyway. This would never go anywhere if she didn't change course now. She would get at least one part right. 'Please come back.'

A heavy sigh. His voice gentler when he spoke again. 'I can't, Cassie. I'm due in London on Monday.'

'But... you *have* to come back.'

'Why?'

'I bought you a cat.'

'You bought me a cat?'

'I love you.'

Another silence. This she could not abide. She spoke into it rather than wait it out. 'I'll come to you,' she said. 'To Durham, if you can't come here.'

'Cassie...'

'Yes?'

'Everything else aside, you're still leaving in two months.'

Two months! It was forever, compared to no time at all. Compared to nothing it was everything. 'We can think about that two months from now.'

Another silence. 'All right, lass.'

'A-reet lass? A-reet lass what?' It could mean anything, like 'aloha.' Hello, goodbye, how are you, you're welcome, don't worry, or I'll come back.

'I'll come back. We can talk.'

All her breath came out in a rush. Most of it missed the receiver, thankfully. 'When will you come?'

'I'll come on Sunday.'

The whole weekend. He was going to make her wait the whole weekend. 'Thank you.'

'All right, lass.'

It was something.

Cassie took out the letter again, read it a twentieth time. Susannah's sharp-angled handwriting; Lucas's words. Every time she had to stave off the instinct to interpret the information provided by one in view of the information provided by the other. Every time she had to shelve the sense of intrusion that it wasn't she alone who had seen it; not even he who had written it. What more might he have said if he hadn't been obliged to make use of a go-between?

He had signed his name himself, in ink, at the bottom - not a signature, but printed, only his first name. It was the first time she had seen a sample of his hand. It touched her through her dismay like a beam of sunlight through water; she guessed that it was probably the only word he ever wrote regularly. She wished that he had written his full name, or that his first name were longer, that she might have more to work with. There was little to glean from those five letters. The c protectively cupping the u, and the L, almost a C itself, supple at the hip, embracing the whole word. The s generous, for a man's hand, in the lower bend. There was no tell-tale dot at the end, she noted, no ghostly full stop. Usually this would indicate some open-endedness in the identity, but Cassie chose to read it as an invitation to reciprocate; a suggestion that this was not the end of the story.

*Dear Cassie*

*So it seems this will have to serve as goodbye, at least for now.*

*I hope you will accept my apologies if what follows comes across as a volte-face on my part, or worse; a betrayal.*

*When I told you it was Sam's own weakness that led to his death, it was at least partly out of self-interest. I had my own reasons for wishing to believe that he was not worthy of you, and for wishing you to believe that he had never been worthy of you.*

*For this I am deeply sorry. It was not my place to pass judgement on his character. Not because I never knew him, nor because I could not possibly understand, from your single account, the intricacies of your relationship, although both are true enough. But worse, because I offered those words to you in the guise of impartial advice from a friend, when in reality I was anything but impartial, and wished to be something other than a friend. It was too easy, under those circumstances, to misuse your trust.*

*I know you are presently at sixes and sevens with the very idea of forgiveness. But I hope you will, at least, try to understand.*

*In all honesty - and the time for honesty has come - I had no desire to like Sam. When Justin asked me to learn his piece for you, I accepted the task with less than a good will. But I'm glad that I did, if only because it has put me in a position to tell you this:*

*Having spent that time in dialogue with the musician, I can say with assurance that Sam was a man of insight, passion and sensitivity, and it would have been a privilege to have known him in life.*

*As to continuing with my own, I have yet to come across a better formula than that offered in the three final commandments of his nocturne, and attempt to proceed in all things with humility, with compassion, and above all, with a sense of wonder.*

*I will think of you often, and wish great things for you.*

*Lucas*

She could not tell if the tone was disconsolate, or philosophical, or resigned. But it read very much as the work of a man making a heroic effort at grace in defeat.

How on earth had she let this happen?

Navigating again and again the meagre contours of the name, Cassie was, of course, looking there for some shadow of the word notably absent from the space just above it, that other L-word, which she wished now she had not said, so keenly did she feel the pain of the fact that it had not been returned.

## Full Harvest Moon

The room is white except for the last flowers brought by Sam's mother, which are yellow, and the patches on the quilt bundled in the corner, which are several different colours, all washed out and faded, and the green eyes Cassie has not yet noticed. The flowers are sunflowers, from their garden in Jonkershoek. Dianne has chosen six of civilized proportions. Some of those still growing in the seldom braved tangle of creepers at the back of the house are as tall as a child, with faces the size of a human face. The quilt is Sam's own. The eyes are Mia's.

It is seven in the morning. The nurse has pulled the curtains. The sunlight is already strong enough to warm the surfaces it strikes.

Cassie sits down by his bed. For ten minutes, she thinks thoughts directed at the unsympathetic audience that is the ECG monitor, occasionally breaking from interior monologue into a whisper.

If he wakes up.

After ten minutes she turns her head, and at last she notices the watcher in the corner. Her limbs are folded into the recesses of a chair, the patchwork quilt tucked around her, her hands and elbows curling over the top, her feet peeking out from the bottom. Cassie starts. The feet of the chair squeal on the linoleum.

'He's long gone,' says Mia.

'How are you so sure?'

The green eyes do not leave her.

Cassie rises from her place, but Mia is still staring dead ahead.

After a pause as long as a prayer, she answers. 'You wish it was me, don't you.'

'What?'

With Cassie out of the way, Mia's eyes are now resting on Sam, lying with his head covered in bandages and an oxygen tube up his nose.

'I wish it was no one, Mia,' says Cassie.

After thirty seconds of silence, Cassie realises that Mia is not blinking. She has been sound asleep for the entire exchange.

A few moments later, her dark head nods forward and she draws her extremities in under the quilt, like a snail retreating into its shell.

It was just dreamtalk, it might have meant anything. But Cassie thought again of the deer, the lion, the cabbage, and how the riddle had never worked out in her head once she added the fourth, the stranger. In the end, in her mind, she always had to choose.

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At five o' clock on Friday, the first of September, Justin entered the Morningside apartment to find Mia and Cassie at opposite ends of the living-room, on their feet, staring at each other with eyes wide, as if there was a Tyrannosaurus between them.

'Am I interrupting something?' he said.

Cassie looked across at him and shook her head.

'We'd better get going if we want to find parking,' he said.

It was six thirty in the evening when the crowds began to gather at Meadowbank Stadium. As they were being frisked at the turnstiles, they bumped into Toby Carmichael.

'Greetings, young hayseed,' said Justin. 'What on Earth are you doing at a Radiohead concert?'

'I'm as alienated as the next youth,' said Toby, smiling, his arms held up as the bouncer patted him down.

'You hide it well,' said Justin. 'You're not resentful. *Or* disillusioned. You're not even pale.'

'Neither are you,' said Toby.

'I could be disillusioned,' said Justin.

'So could I,' said Toby stoutly. 'Roberta will teach me.'

He smiled his autumn-apple smile at Cassie. She dragged me along,' he admitted happily. Then he turned the smile on Mia in case she felt left out. 'Wow,' he said reverently, his brows raised. 'You've got it down to an art, haven't you, lass?'

'Toby, this is Mia, Mia, Toby,' said Cassie.

Mia looked down at his hands. 'You brought an umbrella?' What kind of idiot brought an umbrella to a concert? she thought.

'It's going to rain on us, you realise,' he said.

'Well, good luck getting it open without poking six people's eyes out,' said Justin.

Toby spotted Roberta, waiting on the other side of the turnstiles, and waved. 'Shall we go in together?' he said.

They walked down the hill, past the bleachers, over the running track, and onto the field. The warm-up act for the warm-up act was midway through its set. The crowd was already five thousand strong.

On Wednesday, when Cassie had come home from her round-trip to the Virgin Megastore, bearing her offering, she had climbed the stairs to their flat with trepidation.

Having loaded the afternoon with more significance than Mia could ever guess, she had anticipated, irrationally, to be greeted with anger and contempt, and rationally, to be greeted with the same world-weary lassitude she had last seen. What she did not expect was Mia not being home.

She felt rather more deflated than relieved to find herself abruptly standing down. It had taken her hours to prepare what she wanted to say, and to prepare herself to say it, even though it was, in essence, only two words.

She had decided to approach the subject by telling Mia about the day she had encountered Felix. It would be like a parable, she thought. She would tell Mia how much better she had felt when she ran into him in Clicks, and he greeted her like an old friend, and she realised everything was all right between them, that he had forgiven her.

We both loved Sam, she would say. And he loved us both. He would want us to be at peace with ourselves and each other.

But then Susannah had shown up with the letter, and Cassie had spoken to Lucas, and said three words that were even harder, and by the time Mia returned, she hadn't the strength for another two.

Mia had at last returned as the sun set, looking markedly less like an animated corpse than she had in the past week. Cassie thought she could see the aftermath of sex in her; in the way she moved.

'Where've you been?' she had said. 'Did you go and see Sebastian?'

'Yes,' said Mia.

She was not surprised, but she was dismayed. It really was starting again. Still the same old Mia. She had just lost Matt, and she had lain down for the first man that would have her.

It was none of her business, except that she was concerned for Justin, who was rather obviously keen on her.

And except for the fact that it might all be her fault.

'I have something for you,' she had said. She gave Mia her concert ticket.

'What's this for?' said Mia.

'Just a present. I bought three.'

The warm-up act was over.

It was not yet too dark to tell friend from foe, and the stage glowed like a spacecraft in a gel of crystal blue light, the crowd around it chanting a cacophonous introit. The beams of the par cans stood latticed in the darkness, slowly turning from blue to alien-green, then mauve.

The chant grew in volume.

There was their prophet, creeping onstage, hunched and cautious, as if late for a tutorial. His disciples roared.

And here was Mia beside her, her white face tinged with blue, like silk under moonlight.

And here was Justin, standing behind Mia. He had his elbows on her shoulders, and Mia was leaning back into his chest.

Cassie had waited until the last minute, until today, as they were getting ready for the concert. It had perhaps not been the best moment to bring it up. But there might never be a good time.

'Felix Baum?' Mia had said. 'He was in the Cape?'

'Aye.'

Cassie had not been able to tell Dr. Patel this. This she had not told anyone except Lucas. That the point was not that it was good to know there was some reason for her and Felix having been friends, other than Sam. The point was not even that she had, in fact, made a wish when she blew her eyelash off his ring finger.

The point was that somewhere deep down she had believed she stood condemned. Doomed. Damned. And when she ran into him, a year later, and he was not angry with her, when he had told her she should leave, *could* leave, that she deserved a future...

'I was so relieved,' she said. 'Ever since the funeral, I had thought he blamed me.'

'Why?' said Mia. 'What could you have done?'

As if she had never thought about it before. Or had Mia really never thought about it before?

She could say this much, now. 'I didn't think Felix blamed me for what I did or didn't do that night. I thought he blamed me for convincing Sam to stay that year.'

'Oh. I see.' It was like a pantomime. 'Did you blame yourself?'

'No,' Cassie answered immediately. 'Well. I might have, once. But I've realised it was, at least partly, Sam's own fault.'

'Sam's fault?' said Mia. 'How could anything be Sam's fault?'

'It was Sam's decision. To stay.' It sounded so much weaker now that Lucas had taken it back. She pressed on regardless, with the faith of an alchemist. 'I've been thinking,' she went on, 'you and I never really said as much to one another. Maybe we just didn't think it was necessary. But, if it could make so much difference to me after a year, maybe it can make a difference to you after two years. So I want you to know, just in case it was ever in doubt, and just in case it means anything, I never blamed you.'

'I never blamed you, either,' said Mia.

Cassie frowned. 'What for?'

'What do you mean?'

'What did you never blame me for?' said Cassie.

'Well, what did you never blame *me* for?' said Mia.

'Are we talking about the same thing here?' said Cassie.

'I'm talking about Sam getting shot in the head.'

'So am I.' In that case.

'Right. Okay. So what exactly did you never blame me for?' said Mia.

'I, well, for a start, I never blamed you for running away.'

'For a start?' said Mia. 'He *told* me to run.'

'That's not what he said.'

They stared at each other, each astounded by what was, potentially, about to happen, each using the silence to gauge how far the other was prepared to go.

'Tell me then,' said Mia. 'What else did you never blame me for?' The verdant kohl-rimmed eyes at last fully alive and engaged, darting like geckos from point to point about Cassie's face.

'I never, this is, what do you want me to say?'

Mia turned away. 'Nothing. Please, don't say anything else.'

But she would not lose this, she would not get lost in this. She had started out wrong. It was supposed to be an apology. She had to get the two words out.

'Look. Let's not get wrapped up in what happened that night. Nothing that happened that night is anyone's fault except Isaac Butshingi's. It was beyond our control. But I've been thinking the whole thing over lately, since we parted ways last year, and now, well, I want to get everything else out in the open.'

'Everything else?'

'The things we never talked about.'

Mia was looking at her again.

'Which things?'

Deep breath. Over soon. And just beginning. 'We never talked about the fact that you and Sam had something on when he and I got together.'

Insofar as she had imagined Mia's reaction at all, Cassie had imagined, or prepared herself for, a barrage of questions and recriminations. She had, by her five years' silence, pretended ignorance. And now she was pretending ignorance of having pretended ignorance.

She could no longer pretend to herself that she had not chosen this moment to reveal this news on purpose, not because there might never be a good time, but because she knew that, whatever happened, Justin would come home soon to pick them up. If Mia was at her throat with a kitchen knife, he could be counted on to intervene.

To her relief, this did not appear to be news to Mia at all. Mia was simply looking at her. There was no nameable emotion on her face, but she did not seem surprised.

Cassie said, 'I never told you that I was sorry. Am sorry. I'm sorry.'

Mia said: 'It was a long time ago.'

If she had more to say, she did not say it, for at that moment Justin had walked in.

There were seven screens mounted irregularly along the scaffolding at the back of the stage. Thom Yorke's murine profile loomed in fulsome, Brobdignagian detail on the central screen. The guitarist was displayed on a second, the backlit drum-set on a third. The other four screens showed the crowd from various angles, the laser lights playing on their arms and faces.



Thom Yorke sang about not belonging here, about being a creep and a weirdo, and the crowd hurled back its sympathy.

Every third or fourth audience member held one arm aloft, the Zippos of another age replaced with mobile phones, their owners shooting video clips they would later post on YouTube.

Radiohead looking down at them from three large screens, the hundreds of tiny phone screens looking back, and the crowd broadcast in turn from the stage. This labyrinth of mirrors, this Panopticon, these remorseless electronic eyes and ears everywhere. She shouldn't be here. These people singing along in strangled, keening voices to the strangled guitar and the keening synth with their votive offerings of documentation and dissemination, they were like worshippers or mourners, or members of a suicide squad, or paranoid androids, they were here to be alone together.

*Keep your friends close,* thought Cassie.

Was that what Mia was doing, all those years? thought Cassie.

Was that what *I* was doing, all those years? thought Cassie.

*What else did you never blame me for?*

Sam's last act, saving Mia's life. Sam's last word, Mia's name. Mia had left him to bleed on the road. Mia had left her to get him in the car by herself. And she had the audacity to say he appeared on *her* balcony. That he spoke to *her* in dreams.

And she remembered Dr. Patel, remembered saying to him, it was nice to know there was some reason for our friendship, other than Sam.

But she had not been talking about Mia.

The opening chords of *Pyramid Song* rumbled from the stage. The crowd bellowed.

Justin was leaning over to hear something Mia was saying. There was a lovely innocent smile on his lovely innocent face.

Cassie felt she could identify with every person around her who looked lost, or confused, or lonely, or afraid, which was, at the last count, almost everyone.

Perhaps Mia did hate her, after all. Perhaps Mia had cause to hate her. Perhaps Cassie had no right to ask anything of her. Perhaps Radiohead was an insulting consolation. But she would not see Justin used and tossed.

'I'm going to find a toilet,' said Mia.

'Wait a second.'

'Yes?'

Thom Yorke had announced a short break. She would say it now, while no one was screaming, and Justin was off to one side with Toby.

'Mia,' said Cassie. 'Can I ask you something?'

'Yes?'

'Are you planning on going for Justin?'

"Going for" him?" said Mia slowly. 'What is this, Std. Six?'

'I just want to say,' said Cassie. 'Please don't. He really likes you.'

'So what?'

'Please be careful of his feelings.'

Mia did not answer. The details of her eyes lost in the dark. For a long moment she looked Cassie in the face, then her eyes flicked around Cassie's shoulder, to Justin. She turned and began to work her way through the crowd. Cassie was not sure whether or not she had nodded.

One cold night, lost in a forest, Cassie had thought of something else she could give Mia. It would have been a grander gesture. But she couldn't face the idea of parting with it, now.

*This piece of music? Ah, your father and I got together because of this piece of music...*

No. That wasn't right. It was Sam's music.

Why shouldn't Mia have it, after all?

Why should she?

Just another thirty-eight hours, and he would be in Edinburgh.

Toby Carmichael was attempting to answer his mobile phone. 'Speak up. I'm at a concert. Radiohead. Aye. Roberta, and we've joined up with Justin and Cassie and Cassie's wee friend... aye... aye...aye....Sunday? Twelve sharp? Easily done... all right. Cheerio.'

Cassie had resolved to put all her concerns about Lucas on hold until Sunday. At this task, she had, thus far, been quite spectacularly unsuccessful. She had a hunch, and could not resist asking. 'Was that Lucas?'

'No, that was Chris.'

'Oh.' Her hunch had been wrong. 'Have you spoken to Lucas lately?'

'The other day. He's still in Durham. He's popping back up on Sunday to say goodbye again. He sends his love.'

He was like a man speaking sacred words in an unfamiliar tongue, with no idea of their impact on the natives. She could see from his face that he thought nothing of it, knew nothing of it. If there was a message there for her, he had no notion of it. His attention had already left her; he was looking out over the stadium with one ear cocked down towards Roberta. How to get more information out of this? It might even have been something Toby had added himself.

She couldn't wait too long before asking, or it would seem all the odder.

'To me in particular?' she said, casually, aiming for a politely perplexed expression. She was not at all sure if she had pulled it off.

'Pardon, lass?'

'Did he send his love to me in particular?'

'Aye.'

He did not even look at her as he said it, but he did nod. She fought, and to her credit, succeeded in overcoming, the urge to ask him to confirm it again, in case he hadn't understood what she was asking, and thence to drill him for a verbatim account of the entire exchange leading up to and following these words and a nuanced exegesis of the way he had delivered the words themselves.

The sky began suppurating gently.

'Here we go,' said Toby happily. He held his palms up to feel the first drops, as all the other hands holding mobile phones came down and disappeared into dry pockets.

'Um, sorry, Toby, but when did you speak to him?'

At last Toby looked at her. She knew she was making a fool of herself, but it was very important to find out if he had said this before or after she had spoken to him.

'I believe it was the day before yesterday, Cassie.'

This didn't help much. 'Wednesday?'

'Aye, that particular day before yesterday.'

He looked at the stage. The band was starting again. Something that began with a mesmeric high pitched whine, Cassie didn't recognise it.

'Ah, Toby?'

'Eh?'

'What time?'

'Did I speak to Luke?'

'Aye.'

He was shouting, now, over the high pitched whine. 'I'm not certain, lass. Perhaps six.'

'Six?'

'Aye!'

'In the evening?'

'Aye!'

He had said it afterwards. If he had really said it.

'Toby?' she was forced to shout as well.

'Cassie?'

'What exactly did he say?'

He took his hand from Roberta's and turned to face her in full. 'My *brother*,' said Toby, 'said that if I saw you, I should *send* you his *love*.' He smiled as if to bring the matter to a close. 'At six o' clock in the

evening,' he added. 'On Wednesday the thirtieth.' He raised his eyebrows at her, waited to see if anything else was forth-coming, and turned back to Roberta.

Cassie felt faint. Her head drifting, her feet barely moored. She had an urge to be in physical contact with Justin, to draw on, or try to draw on, that great well of power. She leaned against him, shoulder to shoulder. He had not heard or noticed what had just happened, but he braced himself against her weight, unquestioning, while the light turned crystal blue.

A spotlight appeared on the stage. Thom Yorke had repaired from the piano to the mic stand, his face now adorning all six auxiliary screens. The central screen that had shown their own huddled faces a moment before depicted a writhing strand of silver light. They were playing *Paranoid Android*.

Rain down, drawled Thom Yorke, and it did.

Slowly, in unison, the crowd raised its arms to the sky.

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Colin Greenwood on the synth was shredding *How to be Disappear Completely* to pieces. In a good way, but nevertheless, Justin wished they would play more stuff off OK Computer and Amnesiac and rather less off Kid A and Hail to the Thief. He had been enjoying the nostalgia evoked by *Karma Police*.

His wish came true on the next number, and he smiled.

*Paranoid Android*, he said to Cassie. She was leaning against him, and merely nodded.

He looked out over the crowd to see if he could spot Mia. He was sure she would not want to miss this one.

'Where did Mia go?' he said.

'To the Porterloos.'

He was surprised that Cassie had not gone with her, in this one environment where it actually made sense for girls to go the lavatory in flocks.

There was definitely something amiss between them. A few minutes earlier, some five feet and three alienated youths to his left, he had seen the two girls facing each other, as they had been in the flat when he walked in that afternoon. Cassie's back was to him, and most of Mia obscured. Her one visible eye had sidled over like a chameleon to regard him.

Then she had bobbed off out of the crowd.

As it began to rain, he spotted her at last, trying to get back to them. She had given up at the natural boundary where the crush became thicker around the stage.

Cassie was still leaning against him. Gently he propped her back onto her feet.

He had picked up since the day before that she chose to be near him, sitting closer than she might have otherwise, or as now, actually touching him. For his part, he would have preferred it if Cassie had not chosen this exact point in their relationship to reveal a soppy and clingy side. He didn't want Mia to get the wrong idea. She had been giving him what he thought he could safely take as signals all evening. Or at least, she was looking at him more often than she had before now. And she had let him put his elbows on her shoulders. He pushed through the moshers to meet her.

'Are you enjoying it?' he said to Mia, who did not look as if she was.

He thought she looked marvellous anyway, her white face stained black where her eye makeup had run in the rain, the smattering of freckles standing out against her paleness, and her pupils large.

'Yes,' said Mia. 'I love Radiohead.'

But twenty minutes later, she sank to her haunches.

She looked along the avenues of Converse and denim, looked up to see cloud banks colliding and condensing with the green beams of the laser display shivering on their tenebrous bellies, and a circle of velar palates as those around chorused in alienated harmony to the most nihilistic bit of *Paranoid Android*.

For a moment the clouds shuddered with their own furious internal light. Mia counted four seconds, and then a roiling belch of thunder staggered unsteadily behind, and the drizzle became a shower. Diagonal bars of raindrops danced green and then mauve. They doubled in Mia's vision.

Rain down, sang Thom Yorke. The crowd howled.

She knew all the words, and all the harmonies, she used to make Katrina laugh with her impression of the lazy eye, but Mia did not sing along. She hardly even heard: it was just noise.

Justin Silveira, arcing over her, blotting out the clouds that were blotting out the stars. 'What's wrong?' She saw his mouth forming the words, but could hear nothing over the crowd. In response she shook her head.

He knelt beside her, his knees clicking powerfully. 'You didn't take anything, did you?'

'Take anything?' said Mia. 'No. I think I'm just hungry.'

Justin raised his face to the sky; she saw his throat pulsing as he swallowed. When he looked down again his eyelashes were laden with rain. He was wearing only a t-shirt and jeans, and these were already soaked. 'Come on,' he said. 'Let's go to the concession stand.'

Mia looked across in the direction of Cassie. 'What about her?' she said.

'Toby's there.'

'Hadn't we better tell her we're going?'

Justin frowned. 'To the concession stand?' he said.

Mia already knew they would not be coming back. 'Perhaps she wants something,' was all she said.

'She's too far away,' said Justin. 'It will take us fifteen minutes to get through these people and ask her.' He rose to his feet, extended a hand down to help her up. His fingers were long and warm.

Justin walked just behind Mia as they weaved through the crowd, so that he could protect her from the worst of the jostling. His lower arms and his hands touched her occasionally, on the shoulder, on the back. By the time they got to the concession stand, and saw the queues, the rain was hammering down with a dour will. They hid for a moment under the awning of the ice-cream truck. The vendor was not doing very good business.

'Should have brought a raincoat,' said Mia.

Justin nodded. He wished he had a jacket or a coat to offer her. He would have liked to see her small body engulfed by the amount of fabric it took to cover his, her hands disappearing into the sleeves, her fingertips just emerging, perhaps, as she brushed wet hair behind her ears.

'I don't know about you...' said Justin.

'Yes?'

'But I think I can live without seeing the end of this concert.'

'I think I can too,' said Mia.

'Shall we go and get something to eat somewhere else?' said Justin. 'Somewhere dry?'

'All right.'

Justin took out his phone and dialled his step-sister. Predictably, she did not answer. No one could hear their phones above the music. He left a message to say they would meet her at home.

'Are you sure it's all right to leave her alone?' It was her last chance.

'She's safe with Toby, Mia. I promise. He'll take care of her.'

Both of them looked out over the crowd one last time, hoping to assure themselves of this. Justin laughed and pointed. Mia followed his hand, and saw a single black umbrella held aloft near the front of the stage.

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When she was first close enough to him to smell his skin, Mia was confused for a moment by a sense of recognition, of having arrived at a place that was familiar and almost safe. It would have been nice to trust it. But she realised too soon that it was the smell of the bed she had been sleeping in for the past two weeks; the smell of her first week of good sleep in months.

Nothing else about any of it seemed familiar, not even the barest bones of the process. He was all supple flesh and great height. But she had become used to his smell, and she took such reassurance as she needed from this.

Mia, being touched by him, felt impotent to stop it, now that she had begun it, and absent. In the dark house, he was a series of intense sensory impressions, presumably unified by some driving will, but if so, she had lost it, or had yet to locate it, a sense of what held this man together. From his body a heat issued, from his skin a hale scent like rained-on suede reached her, on his breath a scent that made her want, yet smelled nothing like, roast chestnuts. She had never had this experience of another human being before; that her skin being touched by his skin felt like it was only skin touching her, warm and smooth and alive, but not skin that belonged to someone.

The darkness around them was cold and the air astir. Someone must have left a window open.

She knew he would kiss her sometime, soon: his eyes, burn-black, had been all but emptied of meaning by desire and the intention to fulfil it.

It makes no sense, it must be some sort of a mistake that this happens, was what Mia was thinking.

This happens to everyone, she thought. People want more than they are wanted, or are wanted more than they want. They coincide briefly in their desires, the sets of things they want overlap for a while, sometimes long enough for a word like love to have been invented to describe it. And this happens. People want the same thing to happen for different reasons.

In an email she had written months ago, Mia had asked what Justin was like, and Cassie had written back, *he's indestructible*. Mia hoped that she, Cassie, was right.

I never blamed you, Cassie had said. It had run out of her mouth like an advertising jingle.

His mouth is on hers now; it is a kiss, but doesn't seem like one, a kiss being a name for a collection of separate things apprehended together, and her experience of this one still disjointed: a vein struggling to move blood through her inner lip where his tongue has curled up and compressed it, an intimate abundance of eyelashes, as long as a camel's, lowered and fanned onto his cheekbone, a jet of hot not-chestnut breath glancing off the corner of her mouth. Chestnut notes in his hair. A swallowing sound. The connection between these things and the quickening of her own breath. All added to the list, the schedule, the agenda, of the event that was Justin, like the rat.

His face was the wrong shape. Searching, blindly, for the engine of this encounter, she put a hand, then the side of her face, to his chest, to seek out a heartbeat.

He really likes you, Cassie had said. Please be careful of his feelings. It seemed like days ago, another country.

She was distressed in a way she would only place much later by the possibility that these things might disappear, were already disappearing, into the bricolaged memory of collisions gentle, violent, gradual and sudden that made up her lived experience of men. Not because she didn't want to forget him, or lose him, this particular man, but because she had experience, now, of an alternative. Continuity. A face of the right shape. The voice on the phone at midday belonging to the body she saw at the beginning and end of the day, every day, the same sleeper beside her at night, and the shape of the face against hers. A man, one man, who did not hold for her the goal of proving something to someone else. Had Matt ruined her for this? Or had he fixed her? Had Victor broken her again? Had Sebastian? Why had she lost the meaning of this process, the feel of it?

*I never said I was sorry.* Mia had looked at Cassie's face, the fine ice and metal in it, and the push-pull gaze, simultaneously magnetic and penetrating, that had once captivated her, before they knew each other.

Five years.

She, Cassie, had known all along.

Justin's mouth and nose were browsing through her hair. His thumbs were on her stomach and his fingers on her back.

'Look, I can fit my hands almost all the way around your waist,' he said.

She had no sense of his centre. What was the point of him? What was he *about*? There was no way to confirm the existence of his mind, let alone his soul, so she sought out his heart.

Because of his enormous height – he had bent at the knee *and* the cervical spine to reach her mouth, although now he stood straight again – what her ear discovered instead was the crash and churn of his stomach as its juices cast around for something to tear apart and offer his body. In a way it was better, this vigorous lack, than a heartbeat. It fixed him in a state she shared. His orang-utan arms around her. She imagined them tied in a double-bow behind. A voice booming tenderly through the clamouring juices, like God speaking from the burning bush. *Hey... Hey.*

It must be some sort of a colossal evolutionary mistake made at some point, that the desire to possess should apply to something that can desire back, she thought.

For perhaps forty seconds, they breathed together.



'You're also hungry,' she said, to speak first. They had never, in the end, stopped somewhere to get food. He smiled at the double meaning he opted to see. For an answer, he leaned down again.

'Let's eat something,' said Mia.

'Why? Now?' said Justin, who was already in the thick of it. He preferred sex on an empty stomach. But she wanted to see him eat. 'We have time.'

Until this moment Justin had taken her to be unsure of herself, possibly even inexperienced, despite what Cassie had said. The suspicion was formed by her hesitant responses to his advances – the first kiss had only barely qualified as a two-way affair – and cemented when she leaned her head against his chest in such a chaste and childlike way, her body not quite following through.

Guessing that he intimidated her, he had assumed his usual *modus operandi*, aiming to create a safe space for her to feel emboldened enough to take control; equipped, qualified, to take him in hand, by appearing shy yet captivated, which – he had fancied since he was seventeen – was his special skill with women. And then, as she leaned against him, he abandoned all method.

He had been moved by what he saw as an appeal for reassurance and comfort, profoundly thrilled to provide it, to sink his head down and absorb her into the shelter of his body, to note that her scalp smelled like bamboo. But with this quiet declaration – *we have time* – he knew otherwise, and suddenly it was *he* who had proved himself to be inexperienced, unsophisticated, overeager, pushing and grabbing like a yokel at a buffet. He stepped back.

She had the thought, this won't happen again, and she had the thought, I won't let this happen again. And she had the thought, I won't do this. And she thought, I will. She could decide while they ate.

She leaned forward, pressed him back up against the door where he had been, pleased by the way his great length and bulk gave way before her. Just in case she ended up deciding she wouldn't, she wanted one more attempt at a kiss. There was no risk: she could get out of it any time, at any moment; she had learned that much about him in the last few minutes. And Cassie trusted him.

His sudden smile in the dark was both remarkably luminescent and terrifyingly genuine, that Christmas morning exuberance. She had a horrible feeling he had meant it, all of it, the kiss, the embrace, the hey-hey-ing. He really did have feelings for her. She imagined Cassie at the receiving end of it, as she was sure must have happened at least once by now, for her to be wound so tight around him. Cassie was a greenhorn; she had not lived with it, as Mia had lived with it, for years before and years after.

She imagined Cassie in the next room, as she, Mia, had lain in the next room for a year in the Old Slave Quarters in Stellenbosch. *I will.*

What she had seen that night at the concert was Cassie leaning, almost falling, towards Justin, until her shoulder came to a rest against his. That desire for nearness so familiar, that nearness she

used to get too much out of, that licence. And when he had touched her, Sam, she had always told herself, gentling herself, it's okay it's okay it's okay.

Perhaps she would just ask, perhaps she would let him help her decide.

'What about Cassie?' she said.

'Cassie?' said Justin. 'She's my step-sister.'

'I think she likes you.'

'Everyone thinks she likes me.'

'Well?'

'No, she doesn't want me.'

'How sure are you?' There had been an emphasis on the 'me'. A specific emphasis like that had a specific story behind it.

'Very sure. She's completely besotted with my mate Lucas. Hasn't she told you?'

Lucas, thought Mia. Lucas Carmichael. The one with the dog.

Not Justin.

'What's the matter?' said Justin.

Her body had gone soft in his arms. He dropped them.

'What's wrong?' he said.

She stepped away from him.

'Mia... are you, I can't tell. Are you laughing or crying?'

Mia couldn't tell either.

All this deliberating. All this shoring up of the necessary malice, all this damping down of the inevitable conscience, and it was for nothing. Cassie didn't want him.

Of course not, thought Mia. She would have him by now if she did.

'Justin.'

'Yes?'

She did not know how to follow. She said his name again, Justin.

It was not Justin who was without a point. It was not Justin who was empty of meaning. He was a mirror.

At that moment he jolted against her – for a moment she thought he was attacking her – and she jolted backwards, as a key turned in the door and the door opened and Rex entered and put on the light and looked at them with surprise, this wet and solemn pair.

'Oh,' he said. 'Ah.' They stood squinting.

Then he looked beyond them, at the room in which they stood, with considerably greater surprise.

The first thing they saw in the sudden light was the chaos. Couch cushions ripped, drawers pulled out and emptied. Broken window glass, and the curtains billowing and sodden as the wind and rain pushed in.

'What... have you two... been *doing*?' said Rex.

Then all three saw the wrapped brick that had done the job, lying on the living room floor, and in the light of what it meant, scanned the room a second time, for absences.

The hi fi was gone, the amps were gone. Rex's computer, which had still been in the living room from their last mucking-about session, was gone.

'Fuck,' said Justin, and simultaneously they launched themselves towards the passage, towards Mia where she stood in the doorway. Mia, convinced for a moment that they were going to savage her, stood frozen and wincing before they jostled her aside to get through the door, and crossed into their respective bedrooms.

'Fuck,' she heard Justin say again. 'Oh, God.'

Mia followed him cautiously. His drawers had all been pulled out and their contents emptied onto the bed. Mia's own suitcase had been pulled out from beneath it, her belongings scattered. From what she could see immediately, they had taken her shoes and her jewellery. Perhaps they thought they could sell it. Perhaps they had sisters.

Hovering in the doorway as if in the eye of a storm, Mia saw Justin standing with his hands on his head.

'The bastards, the bastards, the *bastards*. Oh my God. My computer. My guitars,' he said.

Rex was making a much more committed and masterful effort at profanity, but although it made many more scenic detours, his tirade too terminated with his God, his computer, his guitars.

Exiting his room, he shouted: 'Fuuuuuckshite, those lu'il arrrrse-peddlers hus ta'en all our demos! There's nothing left besides wha'ever you seent to tha' geezer i' London.'

'I know,' said Justin.

There was no doubt that it was personal. The flat had not just been burgled; it had been torn apart, with methodical passion and doting attention to detail. Care had been taken to destroy beyond repair. Educated guesses had been made as to items of sentimental value.

Rex, after a brief lull, had become audible once more; his tone, if not his vocabulary, now somewhat more restrained. 'Ah se', ah se' we're doon uh noombar thaarrty eeeeh, the la'al gobshite cunts us cleerrred us ooh, aye, aye, ah noo the cunts, ut's a lot of schemies, they've trashed the place, send someone after the foockers reet away.'

Justin had run out of steam, or perhaps was allowing Rex to speak for both of them, and merely stood rubbing his elbows, occasionally blowing air out through puffed cheeks, as they listened to what gradually revealed itself to be an exchange with the police via mobile phone.

From her position in the doorway, Mia could see his bookshelves, their contents emptied out onto the floor. She spotted a crack-spined Robin Jarvis and had to stop herself from mentioning that she had the same book.

'Justin,' said Mia, for the third time in a row, as Rex ended the call and an oddly anticlimactic silence descended.

Justin did not answer or even look her way. To all appearances, he had not heard her.

In the midst of what had suddenly become someone else's catastrophe, Mia felt awkwardly undevastated. She was still flooded with the dreadful, tingling relief that follows a narrowly avoided accident; thinking of Cassie, of what she had just almost done, of what she had been prepared to do. But Justin's copy of *The Alchemist's Cat* had reminded her that there was one item of sentimental value in the inventory of devastation no one had yet thought to check for, and she felt strongly that someone should at least mention it, log it.

She allowed perhaps five minutes to pass before she could stay herself no more. 'Um,' she said to Justin, meek before his manifold losses and glad of his relative calm. 'Where's the kitten?'

She had thought, when choosing her moment to say it, that it would prove an inappropriately low priority to have voiced in the face of lost valuables, and that uniquely inestimable tragedy; lost information, but she was wrong. His reaction was immediate and immediately vindicating: a life was potentially at stake. He snapped out of his daze, meeting her eyes.

'Good God, the bloody *kitten*,' he said, covering his mouth with one hand.

They both aimed first for the kitchen, where the kitten had been shut in before they left the house that night. Mia expected broken plates, but the kitchen was largely whole, although the fridge door stood open. Only things that could be destroyed quietly had been chosen. Mia was not sure whether the cat fell into this category, but it was, at any rate, not there.

They began searching the house, both making reflexive cat-summoning noises until Justin remembered, and reminded her, that the kitten couldn't hear them.

Missing, presumed deaf. Mia went next to the living room, and Justin to Rex's room. She heard him exclaim further over whatever damage and pilfering had been wrought in there, and Rex erupting anew at the opportunity of a fresh audience.

I'm not waiting for the cops to arse around with fingerprints, I'll hae their foocking heeds on a foocking pike by this time to... what are you after under there?

The kitten.

...Bleeding hell, the *kitten*!

Mia went to Cassie's room. Here they had been less attentive, if no less violent, perhaps noting that their victim was a girl. Either that or they had run out of time, but in any case, the destruction seemed a little lackadaisical. The drawers had been pulled out of the bureau, items upended or flung aside, but more to get through them in search of collectibles rather than in an effort to maximise anguish.

'Did Cassie have a computer?' she called to Justin. She could not remember if she had seen one in this room.

'No,' called Justin. 'Any luck in there?'

'Not yet.'

Only one act of wanton destruction was in evidence: the binding of a black counter book lay discarded on the bed, and its ripped-out pages had been tossed in handfuls on the floor. Mia recognised at a glance that it was Cassie's handwriting.

'Cassie?' Justin on the phone. 'Yes. No, we've left. Did you get my message?... We're at home. I... me and Mia. I... because we were hungry.'

Mia shoved a drift of the stuff aside to go down on her hands and knees by the bed. She could have knelt on top of it, but she didn't want it in her field of vision, where she might accidentally read some of it. Not with Cassie's discarnate panic already emanating through from the next room.

*Dear Sam*

She could not avoid seeing it. It was right underneath her hand. The page was otherwise blank.

A foot or two away lay the photo she had given Cassie; Sam holding her up out of the water at the Coetzenberg dam.

Mia sank back, onto her knees.

Dear, brave Sam.

We both loved you so. And you loved us both. And we both wronged you. And we wronged one another.

And it's over now. Or it will be, soon.

A scuffle from beneath the bed.

Cassie, there's – would you stop interrupting? Something's happened. We've been burgled. Yes. I. They've trashed the place. Well.' He stopped.

Mia smiled; all other concerns subsiding into temporary insignificance, when what she had at first taken to be a pair of rolled up tennis socks produced a set of teeth in a pink mouth and hissed at her. She laughed soundlessly.

'*Hierso, kleintjie*,' she murmured, and extended a hand. The kitten crawled, belly to the ground, deeper in under the bed, behind the shelter of the overturned chair. Mia scooted along the bed on her knees, and, with slow movements, pushed the chair out of the way.

'Ca- Cassie? Yes, obviously it's that lot of chavs. The, calm down! Yes, Rex called them. Are – we're looking for it.... Hang on. Mia?'

Mia's attention had been swayed from the demonstrably unmolested kitten. The space of floor she had cleared had revealed an empty manila envelope, and four pieces of paper. She picked up one page and studied it. 'Yes?' she called.

'Any sign yet?'

She picked up another piece. *Sognando. Maestoso*. Sam's handwriting.

'Mia?'

'Yes,' called Mia. 'It's in here. It's all right.' *Con meraviglia*.

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'What does that mean?' said Mia. 'Meraviglia.'

'Meraviglia?' said Sam. It means 'wonder.' He closed the fall as if to hide away what he had just done. 'So what did you think?'

'It's beautiful,' said Mia.

'It still needs some work.'

'What's it about?'

Sam laughed. 'That's what I love about you, Mia. Nobody else I know would listen to a piece of music without words and ask 'what's it about?''

Mia collected herself to smile, to speak. 'So what's the answer?'

She had thought he would say, if you have to ask, you never get to find out. But instead he said, 'I'll show you.'

'Show me?'

'Come with me someplace.'

'Right now?'

'Why not?' He rose from his place at the baby grand.

'Where are we going?'

'It's a surprise.'

They left Jonkershoek behind them, left Stellenbosch behind them. They took to the Helderberg coast road in his father's car. Strand went by, and Gordon's Bay. The horizon greyed. Sam kept going, until the sea, shouting with a fierce living light, lay stretched out beside the road, the surf shaggy white against the dark water and the darkening sky.

She had long since guessed it would be a beach, but not this one.

'Koeëlbai?' said Mia. 'It's about Koeëlbai?'

'Not quite. There's a cave. We'll be just in time.'

'Just in time for what?'

'To beat the tide. Once the water comes up, you can't get in the cave.'

'And if the tide comes up while you're inside?'

'Well. Then you stay there all night, until it goes out again.' He had packed sleeping bags in the boot, together with snacks, a torch, and a couple of the thick jerseys his grandmother bestowed on him each Christmas. It dawned on her that this was exactly what he intended to happen.

'You want to sleep in a cave in the sea?'

'It's perfectly safe. Don't be afraid.'

'I never said I was afraid.'

And the moon began rising, casting its own full cold light on the silver-green fire cascading towards the shore.

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## FOOTNOTES TO PLATO



She had been concerned about seeing him again; had worried that she might stare, or cry, or be unable to speak naturally. There was a chance, she felt, that the distance she had gained in her mind might prove all the more brittle; the rebreak even worse, for having healed in his absence. But it was nothing like that. He was himself alone. Eyes grey and wide-set still, but their faces had grown apart in life even as they had drawn together in her mind. Gone was the nature boy, and any hint of a dreamer; he looked present and game and martial.

'I play hockey now,' he said. Which meant ice hockey, he said, not *moffiestok*. 'They like us big for the hockey season, so I eat a lot.'

He was eating a lot. They had gone to the Green Dolphin in the Waterfront.

BEN-Ja-MIN you NAS-ty YOUTH! *Your crime has shocked me to the core*, she sang in her mind as she watched him make his way through a calamari steak. It was what Sam had always sung, jocularly, when his brother was in trouble with this or that authority figure, and she had had it stuck in her head ever since he had said that these days he went by Benjamin.

The brother-in-law she never had was a grown man; his golden hair buzz-cut in a way she had at first disliked, although it had grown on her in the last three hours. He was heavier – not fat – but there was a functional huskiness to his limbs and midsection. He was bigger than Sam by some degrees. He took up space, generally speaking – he had learned the trick that so many Americans had of projecting his voice so that it resounded through any walled area – but not in an intrusive way. One wanted to be somewhere in that space he occupied and made his own. Cassie imagined a large pack of friends of many different outlooks and talents and persuasions. She imagined an adoring girlfriend who liked to jump on his back at the beach and make a fuss over him when he had a cold.

'Her name is *Meridian*,' he said. A fact which evidently gave him a lot of pleasure, judging by the goofy smile.

'Meridian?'

'She's going to be an archaeologist.'

Meridian the archaeologist. Meridian and Benjamin. Mrs. Meridian Loudon. Well. At least she wasn't a marine biology major. Cassie wondered whether she might be the girl with the Grecian features who had made a lot of posts on Ben's Facebook wall.

The hug he had given her when they met was a hug that would stay with her. 'This is from my mom too,' he had said when delivering it.

They had kept in touch, she and Ben, for the first year, while Cassie was still at UCT. But eventually the contact had trickled to a stand-still, and her news of him thereafter had been gleaned mainly from Dianne's sporadic group emails. Eventually Dianne had stopped writing group emails, too.

By the time she re-encountered him on Facebook and learned why, a whole nother year had gone by, and she was surprised to learn that he would soon be in Cape Town, visiting his mother. She, Dianne, lived here now, alone.

It had been he who said, let's get together.

It was a relief to go back to varsity in the fall, Ben said. When his parents first began to talk about separating, they had both expected something of him, something he could not provide, and the house in Pleasant Hill was like a brooding pressure system with Ben at the centre.

It had all started, of course, when Dianne had talked Sam Sr. out of the second surgery. But it hadn't surfaced until a year later.

'All that time, he would never let it go, my dad. After we left, after the funeral, he phoned that detective every second day for a month, and then once a week for the next six months, asking what they had done, what they were doing.'

Don't give up, Cassie thought, remembering the message he had left her.

'And then suddenly it was all over. Suddenly he didn't have a mission anymore.'

Cassie nodded.

A glass of beer stood before him with the foam undisturbed. He took a sip from it and pursed his lower lip over his upper to collect the fringe of white. Gestures still the same; the way they drank a beer. Identical. She wondered if he had any idea how clear it was to others, no matter what he did to his hair: that his brother lived and breathed inside him, while the rest of them only had memories. Perhaps he did, she thought. Perhaps this was precisely why the nature's child had disappeared, to be replaced by Benjamin Loudon, grown man; only child.

Cassie drank Savanna and listened to him talk. It was odd to hear proper nouns emerging from his mouth with their native pronunciation intact. Moffiestok. Jonkershoek. Stellenbosch. Katjie de Villiers.

'Katjie de Villiers?' said Cassie. 'With Ollie?'

'Uh-huh. They're kind of adorable. Their kids are going to be supermodels.'

'You think they'll go the distance?'

'We like to speculate. Didn't Mia tell you about it?'

'Mia and I aren't in touch much,' said Cassie.

Ben tilted his head, his eyebrows articulating sensitively. 'That's kind of sad,' he said. 'You went through so much together.'

'Do you?' said Cassie. 'Speak to her ever.'

'Sometimes, online,' said Ben.

'And? Where is she?'

'Well, she's here, Cassie,' said Ben. 'Last I heard.'

'In Stellenbosch?'

'No, in Cape Town. She's at Red & Yellow.' He laughed. 'What strange days we live in, when you're practically next door to her and have no clue she's even in your city, and halfway around the world I know what she had for breakfast.'

Strange days indeed. Cassie saw her popping online from time to time; the little disembodied representative in her contacts list, confirming that she was still out there, thinking, living, doing. But they did not speak in any medium.

When she had returned home that night, almost a year ago now, from the Radiohead concert at Meadowbank Stadium, Mia and Cassie had, for the second time in their lives, sat side by side, giving statements to the police.

The first page of the nocturne was in a plastic sleeve in the hand of a female constable: there had been a partial footprint on it which they thought they might be able to use to ID the suspects.

The other three pages were still in Mia's hands. Cassie had said she could keep them.

It was not that night, but the next, Saturday night, when Mia had told her about a conversation she had had with Sam, one evening in January, at the beginning of their last year together. A conversation about Cassie.

Cassie had gone to Cramond afterwards. She did not wish to be in the same building with Mia.

When she came back, Mia was gone. Justin had taken her to the Waverley at her insistence, to catch the next train back to London.

She had left a note. Three words. *I'm sorry*, and her name.

'I think, I hope, eventually they'll find each other again,' said Ben Loudon. 'It's been almost a year, and neither of them has even mentioned divorce, to my knowledge.'

'I hope they can figure it out, Ben.'

'Of course I'm biased, I guess most kids imagine their parents belong together. But I mean, it was always obvious to everyone from the day they met – I've heard their own friends say so – they were made for each other.'

'Yeah,' said Cassie, who had picked it up from him, the yeah-ing, within the space of an hour. It had taken her only a few days to stop aye-ing when she came back from Edinburgh. Every time she ayeed she thought of Lucas. 'I thought so too. I mean, I thought so about your parents, not mine.'

'Eventually they just stopped fighting,' he said. 'But it was still there. All they had was their routines, and not talking about it. That's what held them together. Routines, and not talking about it.'

Held together from the outside in, thought Cassie.

A Chilean tourist asked them to take a photo of himself.

They were walking along the wharf now. Reflected light from the hotel buildings and the single docked ferry lay in iridescent ovals on the oil-black water. The booze-cruisers were throwing pretzels to some late-flying gulls to watch as they caught them in the air.

Ben was unbuttoning, speaking almost compulsively. She wondered if he had talked to anyone about it before now. Probably not quite like this, she thought. There was no one else in the world who was as close to the heart of the matter as she was.

'It started falling apart when my mom went to see his family,' Ben went on. 'My father couldn't deal with that. He couldn't forgive her for forgiving him. Isaac Butshingi.'

'I saw that article in the Sunday Times,' said Cassie. 'You went too.'

'I always wondered why you didn't,' said Ben.

'I always wondered why you did.'

Ben shrugged with his mouth. 'For my brother, I guess,' he said. 'Because he would have gone.'

Cassie nodded. She leaned against a bollard and looked out at the sea.

'Well, no, there's a little more to it than that,' he corrected himself. 'I thought if I could see their faces, see where he lived, everything he had to deal with, I would be able to understand why he did what he did, or at least, how he ended up being who he was.'

'And did you?'

'I don't know if I forgive him. But at least I don't hate him. That's enough for me, for now.'

The seasons had turned. P.W. Botha had died peacefully in his sleep. Cassie was living now in a flat in Tamboerskloof with a view of Table Bay. The wind howled around the corners, but the light in the evenings brought all things to rest.

Her flatmate was a girl from Cologne named Vera Behr who worked for the Treatment Action Campaign and subsisted primarily on Maggie 2 Minute Noodles. Cassie herself had been teaching at UCT. And in her spare time, of which she had seen to it there was a lot, she wrote.

'Do you think you'll stay here?' Ben asked her.

Ah, the question of the hour. 'I haven't decided,' said Cassie. 'Lot of different things to take into consideration.' Well. One thing. Two, if you counted Cole. Three if you counted the deaf cat, who had been named Blind Willie Johnson, and who, they thought, was unlikely to take well to quarantine.

'What's it been like for you, coming back?' she asked.

'Kind of like putting on old clothes,' said Ben. 'They don't fit you like they used to, but they're still yours. You know?'

Cassie knew. It would always be home.

'My mom,' said Ben, 'all she wants is for my dad to not feel guilty anymore. She told me that if being angry with her makes him less angry with himself, she welcomes it.'

'That's generous,' said Cassie.

'It's a cop-out,' said Ben, causing Cassie to turn and face his profile beside her. 'If it means that you leave, it's a cop-out. That's the one part I don't get. It's not like her to give up. She was the one who always told us that running away from your problems doesn't solve anything.'

At last she saw that he was angry with his mother too; perhaps with both of his parents. She saw that it was a well-maintained, considered, mature anger; a thing that had long since moved from the heart to the head, and that it might last many years, and rob him of some of his grace and his life's rightful complement of goofy smiles, if he did not make his peace with it. She was not sure that it was her place, but he had once been her honorary little brother, after all, and she thought she might be in a position, now, to share an insight.

'Perhaps she's just realised they can't pace each other,' said Cassie.

He looked at her questioningly.

'I had a lot of trouble with it too,' she started. 'The idea of moving on. Letting go. For a long time it seemed like a euphemism for running away. Abandoning him.' Neither of them had yet said his name.

'And you've changed your mind?' said Ben.

'I have.'

Ben had not yet realised what Cassie thought she had just realised: that his parents were doing this not because they loved Sam separately, but because they loved each other separately.

Perhaps, Cassie said to him, this was why they must part ways, for a while.

Perhaps this was why she had left: to carry it away with her. To bear that load for both of them until they were ready, at last, to set it down.

This is our compact, thought Cassie. This is my gift to you; this is how my love for you will manifest. I will make it possible for you to blame me that you might forgive yourself.

And that will be a beginning.

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